*To my beloved mother and brother*

# A longitudinal case study of students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers: the writing experiences of five students who spoke English as an additional language

by

## Oxana Poverjuc

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

Institute of Education, University of Warwick

September, 2010

# Table of Contents

# Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to the completion of this research project. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors – Prof. David Wray and Dr. Val Brooks for their guidance and valuable feedback during the process of carrying out this study.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to all students who kindly participated in the pilot test of the data collection instruments. My deepest thanks also go to all the students and tutors who agreed to take part in the main study. This study would have never been possible without their enormous contribution.

I owe sincere gratitude to many colleagues from Warwick Institute of Education for providing me with valuable support and advice on conducting this project. I am also grateful to many colleagues for their time in helping me to validate my analytical tools. My special thanks go to Rossana, Anca, Ioanna, Pinky and Moj.

I am deeply grateful to Eduardo who kindly supported and encouraged me over the duration of this thesis. I would also like to thank my dear mother and my brother for having supported me in difficult moments and for believing I could achieve this high academic goal.

# Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my original work and has not been submitted

for any higher degree in another university.

# Abstract

This thesis explores how students who spoke English as an additional language (EAL) learned to write in a new discourse community, the difficulties they encountered and the changes that occurred in their perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers. The existing literature reported that learning to write disciplinary assignments is an interactional and dynamic process, encompassing not only writing and reading but also social interactions occurring among novice and more experienced members of the discourse community. Nevertheless, previous studies suggested that HE institutions still tend to hold narrow views on academic writing and to provide little attention to its teaching. Essentially, many studies are limited because they have examined how isolated factors (i.e. tutor written feedback or use of guidelines) impacted on student writing, overlooking the complexity of interactions that can come into play and influence student writing.

This research adopted a longitudinal case study to investigate in-depth the writing experiences of five EAL students. To conduct this exploratory project, I employed constructivist and interpretivist approaches and multiple methods such as self-completion questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and analysis of tutors' feedback sheets and handbooks.

This project suggests that indeed learning to write in HE was an active and dynamic process, encompassing *interactions with members of the discourse community* (tutors, peers and teacher-assistants), with *the training system* (taught module courses, writing assignments, academic writing class, CELTE support) and *with institutional artefacts (*samples of previously written work, published guidelines and assessment criteria). Despite a number of literacy practices designed to make the departmental conventions and expectations transparent, there was a level of invisibility of the conventions students were expected to adopt in their writing. As a result, students' writing experiences were fraught with tensions and conflicts that influenced their perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers.

# List of Abbreviations

BERA - British Educational Research Association

CAL – Centre of Applied Linguistics

EAL – English as an Additional Language

EFL – English as a Foreign Language

ESL – English as a Second Language

FL – Foreign Language

HE – Higher Education

HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England

IELTS – International English Language Testing System

JSLW – Journal of Second Language Writing

L1 – First Language

L2 – Second Language

LPP – Legitimate Peripheral Participation

MM – Mixed Methods

NES – Native English Speakers

NNES – Non-Native English Speakers

PGCE - Postgraduate Certificate in Education

PGDE - Professional Graduate Diploma in Education

RAE – Research Assessment Exercise

UK – United Kingdom of England and Northern Ireland

US – United States of America

WIE – Warwick Institute of Education

ZPD – Zone of Proximal Development

# List of Figures

# List of Tables

# Chapter 1 – Introduction

## 1.1 Academic Writing in Higher Education

Recent years have seen growing attention to academic writing as a distinctive teaching and research subject in UK HE. It goes without saying that the hallmark of success for any student at university level is mastery of academic writing (Jones 1999, p.37). Despite the central part it plays in teaching and learning, there is little attention paid to its teaching in UK HE institutions (Coffin *et al.* 2003). Literature indicates numerous assumptions that misinform university policy on teaching academic writing. For instance, the rules or conventions of successful writing are often assumed to be part of the 'common sense' knowledge students have when they enter university (ibid. p.3). Where students are not familiar with these conventions, they are expected to acquire them as part of learning subject knowledge (ibid.), or through general advice on written tasks, or through tutors' feedback (Lea & Street 1998). These findings suggest that there is still an 'institutional practice of mystery' embedded in academic communities that often impedes students who are less familiar with the academic conventions to fully engage in its literary practices (Lillis 1999, p.127).

Literature also suggests that UK HE often perceives academic writing as a set of universal skills (e.g. grammar accuracy, text organisation, language usage) that, once learned, can be applied to other writing contexts (Lea & Stierer 2000). From this

perspective, many HE institutions adopt remedial approaches to supporting students who are new to their academic community. Typically, deficient students are referred to writing/language support tutors who have to teach them technical and generic aspects of writing and to address their grammatical and lexical deficiency. However, this approach seemed to marginalise students, regardless of their cultural and prior educational background, rather than helping them to participate actively in the academic community (Lea & Street 1998). Although these approaches might have been acceptable for an elite education, where the student population tended to be predominantly homogenous, this situation is no longer acceptable within current contexts where an increasing number of students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds enter HE (Coffin *et al*. 2003). This area invites further research on how 'non-traditional' students gain expertise in writing and the conditions under which this expertise is gained.

## 1.2 Personal Interest

I developed a particular interest in student writing while I worked as a teacher at my home university in Republic of Moldova. This university did not provide formal provision for academic writing; however, students were expected to complete different types of writing throughout their learning journey. The only support students were given was the guidelines that detailed writing tasks. Furthermore, in 2004 the university introduced essay writing as a major tool of assessment instead of oral examinations. In the light of this reform, curriculum designers produced a booklet, offering advice on how to complete an essay specific to the department. However, the summative assessment suggested that many students failed to meet departmental expectations. This

situation prompted teachers to search for alternative means of inducting students into writing conventions. Aside from this, my initial interest was mainly in supporting creative writing rather than essay writing.

Having enrolled on a Taught Masters course at Warwick Institute of Education in 2005/06, I continued to read and explore the phenomenon of student writing. Essentially, I gained first-hand experience of learning to write in a new context. Throughout the course, I had to make sense of writing conventions and expectations to complete the writing tasks. Additionally, I observed vicariously how other students wrote disciplinary assignments. I noticed that many students for whom English was an additional language (EAL) struggled to meet the assessment criteria and to take advantage of the learning opportunities. Typically, they attained modest academic outcomes. Observing this situation strengthened my interest in carrying out research that sought to explore how EAL students learn to write in a given context, what difficulties they encounter during this process and what changes occur in their perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers.

## 1.3 Background

This research investigated in-depth the writing experiences of five EAL students enrolled on a Taught Masters course. To conduct this exploratory study, I adopted constructivist and interpretivist approaches and multiple methods such as self-completion questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and analysis of tutors' feedback sheets and module handbooks. The study was conducted at Warwick Institute of

Education (WIE), which was characterised by particular institutional and disciplinary practices surrounding student writing that will be introduced in the next sections.

### 1.3.1 The University of Warwick

The University of Warwick is a relatively new university, established in 1965. Since then, Warwick University has experienced a dramatic growth in student population. In October 1965, it admitted its first intake of 450 undergraduates. In 2007/08, its student population has grown to 16,646, around a third of them being postgraduates. The student population not only increased considerably, but also became more culturally diverse. According to university statistics, in 2007/08 nearly 25 per cent of the student body were overseas students representing over 114 countries (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/about/profile/ accessed 10 August 2008).

To accommodate the increasingly diverse student population, the University aims to build a variety of perspectives and a multiple provision of spaces to increase students' learning. In terms of learning support, the University provides a range of facilities that include a Library, IT assistance, Centre for English Language Teacher Education (CELTE) and Graduate School.

More specifically, CELTE provides support oriented particularly to international students, offering ongoing help, training and advice in all areas of academic language learning. CELTE support comes in the form of:

- Pre-sessional English course – a five- or ten-week intensive English course that take place during the university's summer vacation;

- In-sessional courses – language classes offered throughout academic year;

- One-to-one writing surgery – individualised support to help international students to improve their writing skills;

- On-line learning activities - academic English learning materials for students. (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/learning_english/ accessed 17 March 2009)

The Graduate School provides postgraduate students with sessions on different aspects of academic performance. However, at the time when the research was carried out the Graduate School focused primarily on helping doctoral students, whereas this study investigated Masters students.

### 1.3.2 Warwick Institute of Education

WIE is recognised as a leading centre for teacher education and educational research by the RAE and was rated 8th in the UK (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wie accessed 9 November 2009). The main objective of the postgraduate studies is to make learning personal to both home and international students, providing them with opportunities for extending academic study and professional development in Education (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wie/courses/postgraduate/higherdegrees/ accessed 10 November 2009).

WIE provides a number of Masters courses such as Masters of Arts in Childhood in Society, Drama and Theatre Education, Educational Leadership and Innovation, Educational Research Studies, Educational Studies and Masters of Science in

Mathematics Education. These degrees offer flexible modular study. Students have to complete four modules: a core module and two optional modules from those on offer in their particular course, plus another module either from those on offer in their programme or from any of the other Warwick Masters in Education degrees. All students also have to complete a 20000 word supervised dissertation that utilises the research training received through the core module.

It is worth mentioning that the Masters programme in Drama and Theatre Education encompasses its own distinctive features. The weekly sessions are built around practical workshops led by the programme tutors, tutor assistants, invited guests and students themselves. These opportunities give students a hands-on experience of drama as well as of methods of using drama and theatre in their own workplace. Importantly, this course sets up collaborative work on devising drama schemes to be taught in schools. Furthermore, it entails the support of doctoral students who help tutors to deliver and organise activities.

*WIE learning support*

WIE provides different facilities to support students' academic learning in form of online learning resources (Study Skills Toolkit), electronic feedback, face-to-face tutorials, small group tutorials and a session on academic writing. The Study Skills Toolkit includes a set of learning activities in academic writing, learning awareness, reading and critical thinking. In terms of academic writing, the online resources provide useful weblinks on referencing, cohesion, grammar, etc. The modules are built around workshops, seminars, discussions and tutorials designed to introduce students to

disciplinary knowledge and to develop many research skills relevant to their needs and interests. The department also supplied students with handbooks including assessment criteria and assignment guidance.

## 1.4 Purpose of the Study

The current research set objectives to investigate how EAL students made sense of the writing conventions and literacy practices they engaged in as part of their course of study. It aimed to give a voice to EAL students' perceptions of their writing experiences. It also attempted to identify the changes that occurred in students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers throughout the academic year. This research endeavoured to make an important contribution to the research on second language (L2) academic writing. It is hoped that the findings can shed more light on EAL students' experiences of learning to write in a context-embedded discourse, which can be used to inform the practices of tutors and educators from UK HE institutions. The study also aimed to contribute to the methodology of investigating student writing in HE institutions and to cast light on the success of employing multiple-case studies and multiple methods to study the researched phenomenon.

## 1.5 The Research Questions

To investigate the research objectives, this study outlined the following research questions. The overarching research question that summarises this project is "*How do EAL students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers change over the course of study?*"

The two sub-questions are:

- *How do EAL students come to understand the academic writing conventions and requirements expected by their course?*

- *What are the factors that come into play during the course which impact on the students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers?*

## 1.6 The Terminology of the Thesis

In the literature on English teaching and learning, there are many acronyms used to denote the diversity of student populations learning English: *ESL* (English as a second language), *EFL* (English as a foreign language) students, *international students* and *non-native speakers*. However, each term carries a slightly different connotation depending on students' profile. According to Canagarajah (2002), ESL speakers actively use English as an important language in their social and educational life. These speakers are largely bilingual. EFL students study English in a formal context (e.g. school, university) and have limited competence in English. This community of speakers is largely multilingual, speaking English as a third or fourth language. The term *international student* raises concerns about its social and political implications as this term does not include all students (Spack 1997). For instance, immigrants are verbally excluded. Likewise, labelling students non-native speakers may generate ideological implications, especially when referring to a population that speaks another language than the official language (e.g. Native American Indians in the U.S.).

In this thesis, the research sample includes different communities of speakers. Consequently, I use the term of *EAL* students as an umbrella term to designate both ESL students and EFL students. This term was applied, therefore, to indicate that English is not students' first language but their second or third. Alongside this term, I use the other acronyms when making reference to previous empirical research, retaining the terms that researchers originally employed. To designate students who speak English as their native language I employ the acronym NES (Native-English speakers).

I also employ the term *literacy practices* to indicate activities surrounding student writing and the social structures in which they are embedded (Barton & Hamilton 2000). The authors argued that these processes are both internal to the individual and socially situated, connecting the members of a community through shared cognitions and values. More specifically, literacy practices refer to such activities as one-to-one and small group tutorials, feedback, academic writing class, pre-sessional and in-sessional courses, etc. Besides, I use the term *peer* to denote participants' colleagues who take the same course or other courses within the University of Warwick.

## 1.7 Thesis Structure Overview

This study is organised into 12 chapters. Following this introductory chapter, I will present a review of the related literature in chapter 2. This review includes the fundamental theories and concepts that underpin this study.  It also addresses some important conceptual issues and assumptions that underlie the researched phenomenon. Previous empirical studies on academic writing and feedback are also examined in this chapter. Chapters 3 and 4 will introduce the research methodology, describing the

epistemological and theoretical paradigms that informed the design and data collection instruments.  These chapters will also consider the rationale for choosing a longitudinal case study as the key method. Importantly, chapter 4 will present the major shifts in the research focus, design and theoretical framework occurred as the study evolved. Finally, they will detail the methods used to trial the research, collect and analyse the data. The research findings will be presented in chapters 5 – 10. Chapter 11 will discuss the patterns and themes that emerged from data analysis, drawing on empirical and theoretical studies to support the research findings. In conclusion, chapter 12 will provide a summary of the key findings and the implications for policy and practice. The limitations of this research will also be evaluated in this chapter.

# Chapter 2 – Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction

It is widely recognised that research into L2 writing has a relatively short but productive history going back in the 1960s and it has evolved into an interdisciplinary field of inquiry with its own disciplinary enterprise — including journals, monographs, edited collections, book series, annotated bibliographies, graduate courses and conferences (Matsuda *et al.* 2003). Importantly, this field has established its own journal, the Journal of Second Language Writing (JSLW) that incorporates reports of research and discussion of issues in L2 writing, FL writing and writing instruction. In addition to JSLW, there are numerous journals written by, and for, those who research and teach writing to EAL learners. These include: ELT Journal; Journal of English for Academic Purposes; Language and Education; Learning and Instruction; Studies in Higher Education; TESOL Quarterly; Written Communication, etc.

As was mentioned in chapter 1, the current study explores EAL students' writing experiences whilst taking a postgraduate course in the UK. This research is limited to British HE, but references are made to a number of studies conducted in other English-dominant educational systems such as the United States of America, Australia, Hong Kong and Canada. The literature review draws primarily on the literature of L2 writing.

However, to understand the context within which EAL writers function, this study also refers to relevant literature on L1 writing.

This chapter begins with an overview of the range of theoretical paradigms examined to set up the conceptual and analytical frameworks. It continues to discuss the changes in student populations accessing British HE, differences between L1 and L2 writers, approaches to teaching academic writing, empirical studies on disciplinary writing and feedback.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework: Overview of the Literature

This section discusses the main theories and concepts that underpinned this study and provided valuable analytical tools for its conceptualisation. Importantly, the theoretical framework allowed me to situate the phenomenon under investigation within a specific context, characterised by particular disciplinary interactions and practices rather than regarding it as a decontextualised event that concerned the individual student. This perspective rests on changes that have occurred in L2 writing research where attention has shifted from writing as an act of inscription or product to a broader view of writing, including factors relating to learners, institutions and social settings (Prior 1991; Casanave 1995; Lea 1998; Lea & Street 1998; Jones *et al.* 1999; Leki 2000).

The present study draws on the following theories and concepts: sociocultural theory of learning; community of practice; discourse community; attribution theory; sociocognitive apprenticeship model; approaches to academic writing. The main theoretical tools employed in this study are summarised in Figure 2.1.

**Figure 2.1 The theoretical tools underpinning this study.**

- ❖ **Sociocultural theory**

- ❖ **Situated learning theory**
  - Community of practice
  - Legitimate peripheral participation
  - Discourse community

- ❖ **Sociocognitive apprenticeship model**
  - Vygotsky's ZPD  and scaffolding
  - Brown's cognitive apprenticeship model

- ❖ **Self-efficacy concept**
- ❖ **Self-regulatory concept**
- ❖ **Attribution theory**

- ❖ **Approaches to academic writing**
  - Flower & Hayes' Writing Process Model
  - Lea & Street's Academic Literacies Model

In the next sections, I will briefly present each theory with its tenets underlying the contribution to the theoretical framework.

## *2.2.1 The Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Learning Theory*

As a starting point, this research adopted sociocultural learning theories as a means of exploring the concept of learning to write. The sociocultural theories provide valuable tools to explain the processes by which novices acquire the knowledge, skills and practices needed to become members of a given community. This theory is grounded in a number of tenets, such as communities of practice, discourse community and sociocognitive apprenticeships in writing (Englert *et al.* 2006) that guided this literature review.

## 2.2.2 Community of Practice

Of particular interest to this study is Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice and the notion of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) that illuminate novices' growing participation within a particular community. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning is viewed as a process of becoming, where learners align themselves to a particular community, learn to participate more fully in its practices and adopt new identities. From this perspective, learners require opportunities for accessing legitimately shared knowledge, conventions and practices. Wenger (1998, p.101) indicated that,

> the newcomers must be granted enough legitimacy to be treated as potential members.... Only with legitimacy can all their inevitable stumblings and violations become opportunities for learning rather than cause for dismissal, neglect, or exclusion.

This quotation reflects the potential tensions, struggles and changes that learners' LPP may entail. Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that the notion of LPP may bring to the fore the power relationships between novice and more experienced participants of the community. Since novices are not expert in the field, they are likely to experience struggles over the control of resources for learning, disagreements and negotiation between contradictory viewpoints (Morita 2004) and transformations in their identities (Ivanič 1998). Lave and Wenger concluded that successful learning occurs when learners are able to acquire the insider knowledge to become full, rather than peripheral, members of the community.

Although Lave and Wenger's work referred to training in the workplace, their concepts have been extensively applied to education (Northedge 2003; Bloxham & West 2007).

For instance, Northedge (2003, p.19) has adopted a situated learning approach in the academic community, acknowledging that "academic disciplines are examples of high status discourse communities that discourse primarily through writing". Gee (1998, p.51) extended the concept of discourse community to integrate "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network'".

Swales (1990, p.24-27) has advanced a paradigm that contributed greatly to understanding and defining the complexity of a discourse community. He suggested that a discourse community is characterised by:

- a broadly agreed set of shared goals that may influence all aspects of text production,

- particular interactional mechanisms of communication among members,

- its own participatory mechanisms primarily for providing information and feedback,

- a range of genres, which may be unique to a given community,

- specific lexis,

- a threshold level of members with an appropriate degree of relevant content and discourse expertise.

Seen from this perspective, the concept of a discourse community, when applied to this study, includes the modules of the Taught Masters courses; tutors and tutor-assistants

who represent the more competent members; students who are the newcomers to the discourse community, literacy practices, writing conventions, genres and interactional rules that have to be identified and learned if they wish to become its legitimate members.

Literature argues that writing constitutes the fundamental means of moving towards an increasing participation in the discourse community (Belcher 1995; Jones *et al.* 1999; Coffin *et al.* 2003). Lea (2000) adds that to become a member of a community, students should gain awareness of the culture of the academic discipline: i.e. its histories, its relations with other disciplines, intellectual traditions and its particular academic genres. In this sense, students are learning to speak and write like members of the discipline community and eventually experience what it is to commit to an intellectual tradition (Casanave 1995). Otherwise, they will be regarded as "outsiders" who do not have the "requisite values, knowledge, and skills" (Zamel 1998, p.193).

However, students' growing participation in literacy practices is possible only if the expert members create spaces to make writing conventions and values visible (Lave & Wenger 1991) and to support them through "written language" and "feedback on [their] written communications" (Englert *et al.* 2006, p.214). Accordingly, students who interact frequently with peers and tutors have greater chances "to understand and internalize the perspective of their audience, thereby laying the foundation for the development of dialogical skills that support text production, transformation, and revision" (ibid. p.216). In the light of the theory of community of practice, students acquire writing knowledge and deeper understandings of writing practices through

dialogic interactions with more experienced participants, tools and semiotic means that a discourse community entails. More details about the theories that underpin the use of participative activities to introduce novices to highly-valued conventions and beliefs will be discussed in the next section.

Despite the important analytical tools that are available to conceptualise the researched phenomenon, the concept of discourse community has some limitations. Firstly, it has been suggested that this paradigm is not fully theorised (Prior 1991; Casanave 1995) and is vague, providing little guidance in identifying its boundaries (Swales 1990). It appears that once applied to a specific context, the discourse community metaphor starts to split into smaller units, which may eventually comprise a variety of participants and sub-cultures that have unclear and/or overlapping boundaries with other communities (Casanave 1995). Besides, this term has been more commonly associated with the use of spoken rather than written language (Russell *et al*. 2009). Further, there is a need for appropriate qualitative research methods, e.g. case studies, to explore the array of factors and contexts surrounding academic writing in a discourse community (Casanave 1995). Nevertheless, the concept of discourse community is pertinent to this study as it provides a valuable analytical framework for capturing the complex interactions that student writing entails.

### 2.2.3 Sociocognitive Apprenticeship in Writing

Central to sociocultural learning theories is the tenet that argues for the importance of providing sociocognitive apprenticeship to support novices' participation in and learning of the community's privileged discourses. This principle is well supported by theoretical

claims (Vygotsky 1978) that emphasise the various literacy practices that novices

engage in to access and internalise disciplinary conventions. The concept of

sociocognitive apprenticeship provides therefore important analytical tools to address

the literacy practices explored within the current study.

Vygotsky (1978) brought into focus the learning concept of the dyadic scaffolding,

which indicates how individuals learn to extend their current competence through the

guidance of the context, of others and of the self, in a zone of proximal development

(ZPD). This concept identifies the distance between students' actual developmental level

of independent problem-solving and the higher level of potential development that they

can achieve under the expert guidance or in collaboration with more capable individuals.

Thus, through co-participation students can shift their higher psychological processes

(e.g. writing and reading) from the inter-mental social plane (interpsychological plane)

to the individual level (intrapsychological plane).

From this perspective, Brown *et al.* (1989) suggested a cognitive apprenticeship model

that entails important stages that the more experienced members can enact to introduce

newcomers to the disciplinary knowledge. This model recommends tutors to (1)

"model", by making their tacit knowledge explicit and revealing their problem-solving

strategies; (2) "coach", by supporting students' attempts to perform new tasks; and (3)

"fade", after having empowered the students to work independently (Brown *et al.* 1989,

p.39). Accordingly, this model emphasises the centrality of providing novices with

learning opportunities and guidance that "demystifies the institutional structure of

knowledge" (Bizzell 1982, p.196) and brings the relationship between "knowing and doing into a plane of more active consciousness" (Englert *et al.* 2006, p.209).

### *2.2.4 The Theoretical Framework: Self-Efficacy Beliefs*

Central to exploring EAL students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers is Bandura's (1986) concept of self-efficacy. This notion connects closely to the sociocultural premises of this study, as it views personal agency as socially situated and individuals as products and producers of their own environments and of their social systems (Bandura 1986). Bandura (1997, p.2) defined self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments". Projected to student writing, this concept refers to the beliefs writers hold about their capabilities to master particular writing conventions and to regulate their actions to complete a writing task. A body of literature (Bandura 1986, 1997; Pajares, 1996; Hidi & Boscolo 2006; Pajares & Valiante 2006) supports the view that self-efficacy beliefs are influential determinants of the courses of action writers pursue and of their academic attainment. In this sense, writing is not only a process of making new meaning, but also an activity through which writers engage in self-understanding (Bandura 1986).

This concept offers an important tool for considering how students' self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers change over their course of study. Bandura (1986, p.339) identified four principal sources of efficacy information that may impact, to varying degrees, on learners' self-efficacy and which in turn may modify the actions they adopt to master a given task. These are:

- enactive attainments,

- verbal persuasion and social influence suggesting that one possesses certain capabilities,

- vicarious experiences of observing the performances of others, and

- physiological states from which learners partly judge their aptitude, strength and vulnerability to dysfunction.

Bandura (1986) suggested that the most influential source of efficacy information is enactive attainments. Successes may enhance efficacy appraisals, while recurrent failures may decrease them. The impact of the new experiences depends on the nature and strength of the learner's previous perceptions to which they must be incorporated. Students who hold a strong sense of self-efficacy are less likely to be affected by occasional failures. Instead, they tend to ascribe poor performance to insufficient effort or ineffective strategies rather than to inability. Thus, failure can raise their confidence that better strategies will bring future successes.

Another factor that fuels changes in self-efficacy beliefs is verbal and social persuasion that aims to convince students that they are competent to complete a task. These two sources are particularly important to the current research, as they are interwoven in the feedback practices through which students received information about their capabilities from more experienced members of the discourse community. This is consistent with the theoretical claims that suggest that positive feedback from tutor can heighten students'

self-efficacy beliefs, whereas negative comments can weaken them (Hyland & Hyland 2006a; Pajares & Valiante 2006).

Further, self-efficacy beliefs can be partly influenced by students' vicarious experiences of observing their peers performing. The success of peers, whom they consider to be similarly capable, can raise students' beliefs that they too possess the capabilities to complete the task successfully. Likewise, observing peers, perceived as equally competent, fail despite strenuous efforts, may instil self-doubts about their capabilities. Finally, students' judgements of their own capabilities are influenced by their own physiological states. Students who are overwhelmed by negative emotional states are less likely to expect success as such states may weaken their performance. Importantly, Bandura (1986) argued that there is a stark distinction to be drawn between efficacy information conveyed by contextual events and information as selected, weighted and integrated by students into their self-efficacy judgements. Under certain conditions, students may dismiss information about their capabilities, particularly when their experience contradicts their strong sense of self-efficacy. Additionally, there is a range of factors, including personal, social, situational and temporal circumstances that may affect how personal experiences are cognitively appraised and internalised into self-efficacy judgements.

To explain how learners function within a context, Bandura (1986, 1997) proposed a triadic reciprocality model. He suggested that behaviour (**B**), internal personal factors such as cognitive, affective and biological factors (**P**), and environmental events (**E**) all work as interacting determinants of each other (see Figure 2.2).

P

B          E
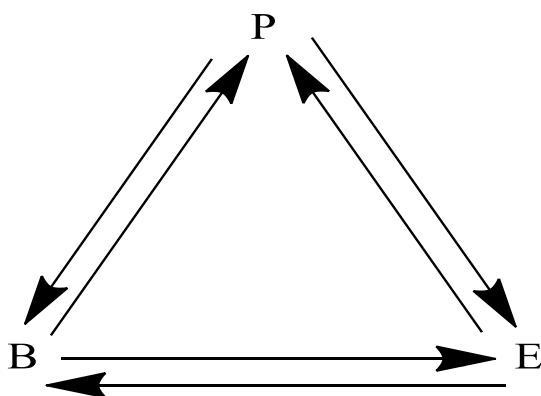
**Figure 2.2 Triadic reciprocality model (Bandura 1997).**

This model highlights the idea that writers' functioning and development are situated in a discourse community that embodies social interactions with its competent members through semiotic means, texts and literacy practices. Therefore, the individual's characteristics, contextual and social factors are in dynamic interaction.

In the light of the efficacy information, students may alter their actions when completing a subsequent task (Bandura 1986, 1997). For instance, writers' self-efficacy beliefs may determine how much effort and time they invest in a writing task, how long they persevere when confronting obstacles or failures, how much stress or depression they experience when endeavouring to meet requirements. According to Pajares and Valiante (2006), the higher students' sense of self-efficacy, the greater their effort, persistence and resilience. These students normally view difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than threats to be avoided. They have greater intrinsic motivation and are capable of enhancing and sustaining their efforts when encountering difficulties in writing. Moreover, they are more likely to recover quickly after failures or setbacks. On the other

hand, students with low self-efficacy are more likely to believe that tasks are tougher than they really are, which may foster anxiety, stress, apprehension about writing and a narrow vision of how best to solve a problem.

Of particular interest to the investigation of students' perceptions of themselves as writers is the notion of academic self-regulation that elucidates how students behave in the face of difficulties and contradictory efficacy information. More specifically, Zimmerman *et al.* (1992) portrayed self-regulated learners as individuals who set challenging goals for themselves, apply different strategies and enact self-regulative approaches to motivate and guide their efforts to attain desired effects. Zimmerman and Bandura (1994) noted that students who exercised efficient self-regulatory skills performed better academically than students who exhibited poor or no self-regulation.

However, Zimmerman and Bandura (1994, p.846) pointed out that writing poses particular challenges for self-regulation, as

> writing activities are usually self-scheduled, performed alone, require creative effort sustained over long periods with all too frequent stretches of barren results, and what is eventually produced must be repeatedly revised to fulfil personal standards of quality.

Even though the authors suggested that writing is an individual activity, writing development is usually situated in social interactions with other participants and can benefit from ongoing provision and support (Prior 1998, 2006; Englert *et al.* 2006).

### *2.2.5 Attribution Theory*

Another distinctive tenet that elucidates students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers is attribution theory (Weiner 1972, 1974). This theory argues that individuals

who are high achievers tend to ascribe success to their high ability and/or effort, but their failures to a lack of effort, which is an unstable causal attribute that can be enhanced or decreased on future occasions (Weiner 1972). Therefore, these students are more likely to try harder in the face of difficulty, choose tasks of intermediate difficulty and display pride in accomplishment. This pattern of ascription fosters a high sense of ability that results in setting high academic goals.

In contrast, individuals who display low achievement ascribe their failure to internal attributes (e.g. ability). Importantly, ability is represented as a relatively stable attribute which is beyond personal control and cannot immediately be enhanced (Weiner 1972). Thus, these students tend, in the face of stressors, to lower their expectations of task completion and to decrease their efforts (Licht & Dweck 1983). Weiner (1974) indicated that when low-achieving students are successful, they are more likely to attribute success to external factors (e.g. luck, task difficulty). This pattern of ascription therefore fosters a low self-concept of ability and a persistent anticipation of non-attainment, which results in setting lower academic goals.

Interestingly, the literature on attribution theory suggests that the patterns of ascription have a gender dimension (Weiner 1972, 1974; Licht & Dweck 1983). These authors noted that women show a stronger tendency than men to ascribe their successes to external factors such as luck or the level of task difficulty. This implies that women are less confident about their ability to succeed in the given tasks and are more likely to develop a lower sense of ability and attainment. They are also more likely to refer their failures to internal factors. In contrast, men tend to attribute their successes to internal

factors and their failures to external factors such as a strict evaluator or bad teacher (Licht & Dweck 1983). Consequently, they are more likely to develop a sense of high ability and performance. From this perspective, one might expect male students who experience success as academic writers to explain their successes by their innate writing skills and/or the amount of effort invested in completing their written tasks. Female students will be more likely to ascribe similar success to luck, or to the level of task difficulty, or previous experience in completing similar written tasks (Wray 2007).

Despite these intriguing findings, it has been suggested that the differences in students' self-efficacy beliefs, that are attributable to gender, may be exaggerated and may reflect their endeavours to present themselves in a socially desirable light (Licht & Dweck 1983; Francis *et al.* 2001; Peterson 2006). That is, female students may respond in ways that make them appear modest and non-assertive as this is how society expects them to behave. Male students, in contrast, may respond in a confident and bold manner because self-confidence coincides with society's masculine stereotype.

To sum up, these theoretical paradigms informed the current work by providing tools and mechanisms to describe a discourse community, writers' behaviours and their self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers. Based on sociocultural theory, the conceptual framework suggests that newcomers' participation in a discourse community is a complex process where they have to both identify and learn its ways of inquiry, writing and thinking through socially mediated practices with more experienced members, semiotic means, contexts and readers (Prior 1998, 2006; Englert *et al.* 2006). Essentially, the main argument that underpins this research is that learners do not act alone; their

functioning as academic writers is a socially situated event where their behaviour, personal attributions, self-efficacy beliefs and environmental contexts all work as interacting determinants. "What students do to complete their assignments is always done in response to their participation in those contexts" (Macbeth 2009, p.45).

The next sections will discuss important theories and concepts that helped to explain and describe academic writing in HE. Firstly, I will consider changes in the student population that underlie my interest in exploring student writing.

## 2.3 The Diversity of the Student Population in British Academia

Interest in developing student writing within British universities began in the early 1990s, when sweeping changes occurred in the student population (Ganobcsik-Williams 2006). These changes resulted in a greater cultural, linguistic and social diversity among students, but no corresponding expansion in university resources occurred to support 'non-traditional' groups of students (Russell *et al.* 2009).

More specifically, the 1992 Educational Act abolished the divide between polytechnics and universities, engendering a rapid growth in student participation and signalling a shift from a small, highly elitist system of HE to mass education (Ganobcsik-Williams 2006). Statistics show that in the 1960s only 10 per cent of the UK population received a higher education, compared with 30 per cent by the late 1990s (Coffin *et al.* 2003) and 43 per cent of the 18-to-30-year-old population in 2003 (Clarke 2003). The UK government aimed to increase this proportion to 50 per cent of the 18-to-30-year-old population by the year 2010.

There has been a substantial increase in the diversity of the student population, encompassing social groups historically excluded from HE. These include students from working-class backgrounds, mature students who are older than 18 when they start university and students from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Ganobcsik-Williams 2006). Finally, there has been a steady growth of international students who have been mainly educated in countries other than the UK. A study of trends in the British HE sector found that in 1962–63 there were 28,000 overseas students in Great Britain, representing 8 per cent of the student population; by 2001–02 there were about 225,000, representing almost 11 per cent (Clarke 2003) and in 2007-08 overseas students made up 13 per cent of all HE students in the UK (Robertson 2008). Although the growth in the percentage of international students enrolled on courses in British academia shows a steady increase (from 8 per cent in 1962-63 to 13 per cent in 2007-08), the actual figures are more impressive (from 28,000 in 1962-63 to 225,000 in 2001-02). Consequently, these figures indicate that in the last four decades the number of international students increased eightfold. Importantly, the percentage of international students enrolled at Warwick University in 2007/08 is almost twice the national figure, constituting nearly 25 per cent of the student population representing over 114 countries (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/about/profile/ accessed 10 August 2008).

As a result of these increasing numbers and the diversification of student backgrounds, it is more likely that today's students bring a wide range of experiences, motivations, complex patterns of participation and different purposes for accessing HE (Lillis 2006). It follows that teaching staff can no longer be certain about what bodies of knowledge and experiences students might bring to a discourse community (Ivanič & Lea 2006).

Overall, these changes in the HE sector reinforce the importance of this research as it examines how EAL students learn to write and how various literacy practices impact on their understanding of the dominant academic knowledge. Further, I will delineate some characteristics of EAL students who constitute the subject of this study.

## 2.4 Differences between NES and EAL Academic Writers

### 2.4.1 Silva's Meta-Analysis

To understand the nature of EAL writers and their writing better, it is crucial to examine the differences between them and NES. Silva (1993), Spack (1998) and Canagarajah (2002) argue that EAL students are often viewed as basic writers who lack the essential skills required for successful functioning in an Anglo-American discourse community. Indeed, EAL writers have been stigmatised as "illogical in thinking and incoherent in communication, by virtue of their deficient L1 and native culture" (Canagarajah 2002, p.11). However, Silva (1993) argued that the empirical studies that yielded these observations were grounded in L1 writing theories that are primarily monolingual and monocultural. These theories provided inappropriate tools for examining EAL writers as they addressed largely NES undergraduates' writing in North American universities.

Central to understanding the nature of EAL writing is an extensively quoted meta-analysis of the differences between NES and EAL writing by Silva (1993). This study examined 72 reports of empirical research, involving a direct comparison of ESL and NES writing and/or the L1 and L2 writing of ESL subjects. Findings of Silva's meta-analysis indicated that L2 writing is more unnatural, more difficult, less fluent and less

effective (in the eyes of L1 readers) than L1 writing. More specifically, findings revealed that L2 writers did less planning, both on global (content) and local (form) levels, focused more on grammar and mechanics and employed fewer attention-seeking devices.

In terms of argumentation, findings showed that L2 writers used different approaches to argument-structuring and established different logical relationships between parts of the texts. For instance, L2 writers stated and supported their position less often and were inclined to develop their arguments by restating their position. L2 writing had less adequate justifying support for claims and less linking of concluding inductive statements. Further, L2 writers either used fewer sentences to signal a following idea/argument or they tended to detail their topics by introducing information that readers considered obvious. Hence, Silva indicated that L2 writing is strategically, rhetorically and linguistically different from L1 writing.

It is worth mentioning that although the studies included in the meta-analysis were valid, Silva acknowledged that they had some methodological problems (e.g. gaps in reporting research participants' characteristics, data collection methods, data analysis and interpretation of findings). In contrast to the present research, this meta-analysis adopted a narrow focus on student writing, examining mainly the textual features such as T units (i.e. a main clause with its subordinate clauses), length and accuracy. Furthermore, these studies mostly investigated the writing that had occurred in language or writing skills centres, where ESL students were normally assigned expository tasks and far fewer tasks involving argumentation.

Despite these constraints, Silva's meta-analysis illuminated the particularities of L2 writing and the issues EAL writers encountered when completing their writing assignments. Of interest to this research are the findings that concerned EAL writers' approaches to argumentation and to addressing the audience. Additionally, this work cast light on cultural and individual factors as potential sources of EAL writers' differences. The next sections will examine the major aspects that inform EAL students' differences in writing.

### 2.4.2 Individual Differences

The literature on L2 academic writing (Hyland 2003a; Goldstein 2004) suggests that EAL students' differences may be influenced by individual characteristics such as age, gender, personality factors, language proficiency and prior educational background. However, studies have predominantly explored EAL students' writing in connection with their language proficiency and prior educational experiences. Thus, some empirical studies (Belcher 1994; Connor & Kramer 1995; Schneider & Fugishima 1995) suggested that EAL students who had a good command of English and relevant educational and/or professional background tended to function efficiently in their discourse community.

Interestingly, EAL students themselves tended to identify language proficiency as their major problem with writing, often complaining about issues such as their poor grasp of linguistic resources and/or of grammar (Benson & Heidish 1995; Hyland 2003a). Certainly, language fluency is crucial to students' functioning in an academic setting, especially for EAL writers who often have to learn English and learn to write simultaneously (Hyland 2003a). Nevertheless, these findings show that EAL students

were primarily concerned with the mechanistic aspects of writing, rather than with understanding the dominant discourses of their course.

It is commonly accepted that students bring to their course of studies different prior writing experiences, learning backgrounds, aptitudes and levels of motivation that may influence their writing development (Goldstein 2004). The literature on the relationship between NES students' prior experiences, attitudes, expectations and their academic performance in writing (Prosser & Trigwell 1999; Biggs *et al.* 2001; Biggs 2003; Ellis & Calvo 2004; Ellis *et al.* 2004, 2005) indicated a range of factors that were significantly and positively related to higher quality outcomes of student writing. These factors were students' prior conceptions of writing, deep approaches to writing (such as viewing writing assignments as learning opportunities and professional fulfilment), intrinsic motivation and positive perceptions of the learning context (such as the quality of teaching, the clarity of goals and standards and perceptions of independence in learning). Yet, there has been little research into how these factors related to EAL students' writing performance.

### 2.4.3 Cultural Differences

Another important dimension that can impede EAL students' academic success is their culturally-determined preferences for organising information and for structuring arguments (Grabe 2001). Indeed, students may construct their knowledge with reference to their cultural background, which can influence the way they interpret what good writing is, the strategies they adopt and the way they respond to disciplinary practices (Grabe 2001; Hyland 2003a). Accordingly, EAL students' full accommodation of the

new academic discourse might be unrealistic (Grabe 2001), as they "cannot be expected to leave behind their identities and interests" (Canagarajah 2002, p.15).

Empirical studies (Riazi 1997; Pardoe 2000; Mu & Carrington 2007) revealed that EAL students tend to transfer their L1 writing knowledge and strategies, such as planning and organizing materials, to many L2 academic contexts. It emerged that EAL learners were able to transfer positively most of the metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective strategies (see Appendix 2.1 of this thesis) to L2 writing (Riazi 1997; Mu & Carrington 2007).  However, some approaches to writing that helped them to perform well in L1 contexts were often rejected by the new academic staff, as they were incompatible with their standards (Pardoe 2000). More specifically, the rhetorical strategies were found to transfer partially unsuccessfully generating low holistic scores. This might be explained by varying approaches to writing across different cultures (Goldstein & Conrad 1990; Ryan 2000; McLean & Ransom 2005; Hyland & Hyland 2006a; Hyland & Lo 2006). For instance, students from Asian cultures are generally portrayed as relying more on the work of recognised authorities without debating them (McLean & Ransom 2005). Anglo-Saxon academic style is linear in its logic and students are expected to debate every view they present (Ryan 2000).

Although clear differences in approaches to writing exist across cultures, it is important that EAL writers are not regarded as a homogenous group (Spack 1997; Hyland 2003a). Spack (1997) argued that the culture-stereotype connection can lead tutors to stigmatise, generalise and make inaccurate assumptions about what EAL students know and are capable of. Watkins and Biggs (1996) identified several misperceptions of the Asian

learners held by Westerners, such as they are prone to use rote-based and low-level cognitive strategies and they are unable to argue. Andrews (2007) also showed in his study that the Masters theses of three Chinese students that he analysed displayed different argumentative qualities. Thus, there is a need to regard EAL "students as individuals, not as members of a cultural group, in order to understand the complexity of writing in a language they are in the process of acquiring" (Spack 1997, p.772). From this perspective, this study supports the view that each student has an individual identity beyond the language and culture s/he is part of and possesses particular self-concepts and self-regulatory skills that play an important role in academic performance.

## 2.5 Academic Literacies Approach to Academic Writing in UK Higher Education

### 2.5.1. Introduction

The current study draws extensively on the three-levelled approach to academic writing introduced by Lea and Street (1998), which is widely referred to as the dominant way of theorising student writing in British academia (Ganobcsik-Williams 2006). As was mentioned in chapter 1, this research underwent sweeping changes as a result of emerging findings, moving its focus from the cognitive aspects of writing to its social characteristics. This change, in turn, engendered a shift in the theoretical framework from the writing process (Flower & Hayes 1980) to an academic literacies approach (Lea & Street 1998). Before I explicate this model, I will outline briefly the fundamental elements of the Flower and Hayes' (1980) writing process approach, which was pertinent at the design stage of this study.

### *2.5.2 The Writing Process Approach*

The Flower and Hayes' writing process approach (1980) contributed greatly to the research and teaching of academic writing for almost three decades by illuminating the relationship between the writer, task environment and the stages writers follow when completing a written task: i.e. planning, composing (generating the text) and reviewing. The stages are viewed as "non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning" (Zamel 1983, p.165). Additionally, Hayes' (1996) reconceptualised model emphasised the role of motivation and affect in writing.

Nevertheless, this approach has been criticised for paying little attention to social contexts, task variation, motivational factors and language knowledge (Grabe 2001; Prior 2006). It viewed writing as a product of a single writer who expressed her/his ideas independently of the social context (Grabe & Kaplan 1996; Hyland 2003b). This position is in contrast to sociocultural theories that see writing as a socially situated process. Overall, this model provided me with important tools to identify the stages and processes writers engaged in when completing their disciplinary assignments. Essentially, these stages were useful in revealing what types of literacy practices participants engaged with and how they learnt the writing conventions.

### *2.5.3 Lea and Street's Model: Introduction*

Central to the current research is the three-levelled model (Lea & Street 1998, 1999) that argues that writing is a socially situated activity. This model includes the 'study skills',

'socialisation' and 'academic literacies' (ACLITS) approaches (cf. Russell *et al.* 2009).

The key features are briefly illustrated in Table 2.1. Each approach will be explained in

turn as a summary of its major features, but not before casting some light on the

relationship between the three perspectives embedded in this model.

**Table 2.1 Approaches to student writing in higher education (based on Lea & Street 1998).**

| *Study skills approach* | *Academic socialisation* | *Academic literacies* |
|---|---|---|
| *Student deficit* <br> • 'fix it'; <br> • atomised skills; <br> • surface language, grammar, spelling. | *Enculturation of students into academic discourse* <br> • inducting students into new 'culture'; <br> • focus on orientation to learning and interpretation of learning task; <br> • homogeneous 'culture', lack of focus on institutional practices; <br> • change and power; <br> • student writing as transparent medium of representation. | *Student's negotiation of conflicting literacy practices* <br> • literacy viewed as social practices; <br> • institutions viewed as sites of/constituted in concepts like discourses and power; <br> • variety of communicative repertoires, e.g. genres, fields, disciplines; <br> • switching with regard to linguistic practices, social meanings and identities; <br> • student writing as meaning-making and contested processes. |

Lea and Street (1998) noted that these approaches are not mutually exclusive; on the

contrary, they each build upon the previous approach. Accordingly, the academic

socialisation perspective incorporates insights developed by the study skills approach;

and ACLITS encompasses both of the other models into a broader understanding of

student writing. The ACLITS approach draws, therefore, on the insights of the other two

models, emphasising the need to gain an understanding of the purposes of writing, of

appropriate linguistic and rhetorical resources to express ideas effectively and of the

contexts within which texts are constructed and read (Lea & Street 1998; Lea & Stierer

1999). Besides, it developed its own tenets that helped to examine dimensions of

academic writing which had not been previously investigated, such as power relations between writer and reader, the role of identity in academic writing and disciplinary writing practices (Lea & Street 1998; Lea & Stierer 1999). Thus, ACLITS attempts to move beyond deficit skills models of writing to consider the complexity of written communication in relation to learning (Russell *et al.* 2009).

### *The Study Skills Approach*

The study skills approach is based on the assumption that mastery of the correct rules of grammar and syntax, as well as attention to punctuation and spelling will improve student competency in academic writing (Lea & Street 1998). This model has reduced literacy to a "set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts" (ibid. p.158). From this perspective, writing instructors have to teach technical and generic aspects of writing and to remedy writers' grammatical and lexical deficiencies. Baynham (2000) notes that students are normally provided with pre-sessional courses or in-sessional courses, often in mixed disciplinary groups, where they are expected to learn core study skills and apply them in their particular disciplinary context. This model rests on the idea that "writing development is considered to be the result of imitating and manipulating models provided by the teacher" (Hyland 2003b, p.3).

This perspective is criticised on a number of grounds. Firstly, it addresses language like a transparent medium where the core study skills are transmitted directly to students who have to master them to produce successful academic texts (Lillis 2006). Besides, this approach views writing as an autonomous mechanism, which can function

independently of particular writers, contexts, readers and is achieved simply by arranging ideas and employing correct forms and models (Hyland 2002).

### *The Academic Socialisation Approach*

The academic socialisation perspective assumes that students need to be acculturated into disciplinary discourses and genres to become successful writers. Tutors' responsibility is to make the features of the written genre visible, whilst students must learn them if they want to access the discourse community (Ganobcsik-Williams 2006).

Despite being more sensitive to students as learners and acknowledging the importance of cultural context, the academic socialisation approach is criticised for assuming that institutional practices and genres are relatively stable and that students have simply to learn and reproduce them effortlessly in other settings (Jones *et al.* 1999). Another caveat is the assumption that writing is a "transparent medium of representation and so fails to address the deep language, literacy and discourse issues involved in the institutional production and representation of meaning" (Jones *et al.* 1999, p.xxi). Seen in this light, disciplinary forms and conventions are considered to be given, rather than constructed and negotiated by writers (Hyland, K. 2002).

### *The ACLITS Approach*

The emerging body of work on ACLITS (Lea 1998; Lea & Street 1998; Jones *et al.* 1999; Russell *et al.* 2009) sees writing as a complex, socially-situated set of meaning-making practices. The understanding of which occurs in specific social contexts that value particular genres and conventions. This research also points to the complexity of

the writing norms and conventions that students need to negotiate to become accomplished members of the discourse community. It follows that meanings are not simply given by the texts but are created through participation in a particular set of literacy practices (Lea 1998).

Bazerman (1988 cited in Lea 1998) provided a valuable framework for examining how students complete a written text through switching between different literacy practices, using a variety of linguistic resources appropriate to each context and through handling the social meanings and identities that they have to adopt. The framework encompassed the following contexts:

- the object under study,
- the literature of the field,
- the anticipated audience, and
- the author's own self.

Lea (1998) argued that students may find it difficult to negotiate the constraints of the object under study, or they may be confused when incorporating the disciplinary knowledge, or they may find that anticipating the audience (the marker) is not an easy task. Finally, students may struggle with constructing their own selves into their writing assignments. Therefore, these contexts highlight the ways in which students need to interact with the construction of disciplinary knowledge, underlining the situated and dialogic nature of writing. This view on the social situatedness of academic writing is consistent with this research framework.

At this point, I want to emphasise that the ACLITS approach provided valuable analytical tools to examine the complexity of student writing in HE institutions. Importantly, it challenged many commonsense assumptions about what is involved in writing, by raising questions about privileged discourses and aspects such as power relations and identity, which had been previously ignored. Ivanič (2004) argues that this view of writing as a social practice is a powerful theory of writing, which is becoming increasingly influential in research on student writing. Arguably, it is the best able to take account of the nature of student writing in relation to institutional practices, power relations and identities, which the other two models failed to consider (Russell *et al.* 2009). Crucially, it provides valuable tools for examining and describing how students learn to write by participating in socially situated literacy events. However, it also has to be acknowledged that it has yet to be fully theorised as a research design (Lillis 2003). Besides, the pedagogical significance of ACLITS is still in its infancy (Russell *et al.* 2009). I also believe that it is extremely challenging and time consuming to conduct research grounded in the ACLITS approach, as it demands numerous data collection instruments to capture the array of contextual, individual and social factors that come into play and impact on how students understand academic conventions.

### *2.5.4 ACLITS Theory and Research using Genre*

It has been noted that the notion of genre is central to the three-levelled model of student writing (Russell *et al.* 2009). Each model is implicitly correlated with a different genre perspective. More specifically, the study skills model is associated with a genre approach that deals with a means of classifying text types according to surface features

or formats. Next, academic socialisation is conceptualised in relation to established disciplinary norms for communication, given primarily by the dominant academic texts within a disciplinary community. Finally, the ACLITS perspective is aligned with the conceptualisation of genre as social practice in which the written work is shared and evaluated. This approach to conceptualising genre brings to the fore the view that writing is a dialogical process where the writer interacts with the reader, texts and contextual factors to produce successful work (Canagarajah 2002). Another way of outlining the complexity of student writing is the taxonomy designed by Samraj (2002). As Figure 2.3 shows, the contextual elements are related to each other and, as a whole, they interact with a student's text. This framework explores the general level of contextual elements moving towards the more specific level of the writing task, suggesting that the highest level of context that may influence writing is the academic institution, followed by the academic discipline, then by the context of the course, which is followed by the task. Finally, there is the writer with his/her prior writing experiences, perceptions of writing and learning styles that s/he brings to the course.

**Figure 2.3 Layers of contexts (Samraj 2002)**
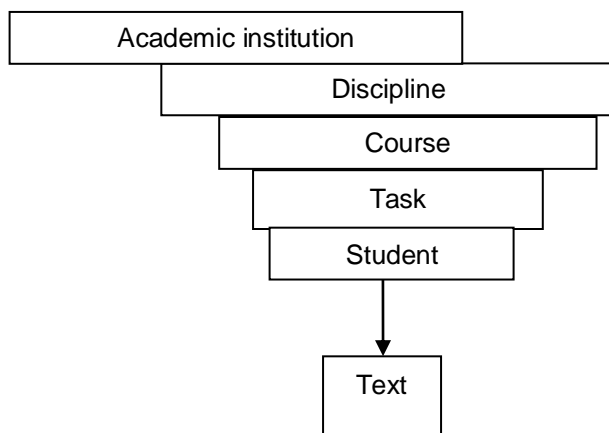
An important pedagogic dimension of research on ACLITS and genre is the centrality of making the key academic genres visible and attainable through explicit instruction rather than through exploration and trial (Adam & Artemeva 2002; Hyland 2003b). Instruction needs to support students in understanding disciplinary practices and in increasing awareness of the functions of texts and strategies to accomplish them (Hyland, K. 2000). This view on explicit instruction of genres is supported by studies that uncovered the variety of genres that students engaged in across their course (Stierer 2000), the variety of tutors' conceptualisations of genres and preferences for different features of student writing (Lea & Street 1998). More specifically, Stierer (2000) examined the types of writing students were required to produce as part of their Masters of Arts programme in a British university. Although students needed to complete three modules during their course of study, findings indicated that there were various genre categories they had to produce. Furthermore, the meaning of genres such as 'essay' or 'project report' varied from module to module and even within modules. Consequently, students could only clarify the meaning of these labels by looking at individual assignment specifications and by interacting with other members of the discourse community. Clearly, writing is a complex area of study that requires the consideration of many factors.

## 2.6 Research into Academic Writing Relevant to this Study

### 2.6.1 Introduction

This section discusses empirical studies that illuminate how EAL students learn to write in given contexts. It is worth noting that relatively little research had explored the complexity of EAL students' writing in academic disciplines (e.g. Prior 1991; Belcher

1994; Casanave 1995; Riazi 1997). Many empirical studies focused on writing undertaken in ESL writing/language centres. It has been suggested that writing at these centres often does not match the writing demands expected in academic courses (Grabe 2001). Indeed, in writing/language centres students usually produce writing that is based solely on their personal experiences or interests (Spack 1998). Consequently, L2 writers are not appropriately challenged, engaging in writing that is often not valued in academic disciplines (Grabe 2001).

Firstly, I will outline several empirical studies that underlined the centrality of academic writing and the fundamental issues surrounding the teaching of academic writing in HE institutions. Secondly, I will present seminal work of ACLITS researchers that has examined some important issues such as the notion of identity, models of academic writing and assessment practices.

### 2.6.2 Academic Writing – a Hallmark of Success in Higher Education

It is widely accepted that "the hallmark of success for any student at university is mastery of academic writing" (Jones 1999, p.37). Writing is considered to be a fundamental means of learning new subjects and of entering particular discourse communities. Besides, writing serves the assessment purpose of evaluating students' mastery of disciplinary content (Coffin *et al*. 2003).

Despite the central part academic writing plays in assessment and learning, little attention is paid to its teaching in HE institutions (Coffin *et al*. 2003). Their seminal work identified a number of assumptions about the role and nature of academic writing,

offering insights into the institutional policy on teaching academic writing. For instance, the authors indicated that academic writing is often viewed as an invisible dimension of the curriculum because "the rules or conventions governing what counts as academic writing are often assumed to be part of the 'common sense' knowledge students have" (ibid. p.3). This view is supported by some empirical studies (Lea & Street 1998; Ivanič & Lea 2006) that indicated that most UK HE institutions tend to assume that students already know how to write for academic purposes when they embark upon their course of study. Likewise, they believe that EAL students know how to write academically as a key requisite to enter British HE is to obtain a good pass in an IELTS or equivalent examination, which includes 'writing'. However, it has been suggested that IELTS gives some indication of the students' overall language skills, but provides little guidance concerning their academic writing abilities (Carroll & Ryan 2005). In cases where students are not familiar with writing conventions, they are expected to acquire them as part of learning their subject knowledge (Russell *et al.* 2009) or through general advice on written tasks and/or tutor written feedback (Lea & Street 1998).

Furthermore, it seems that academic writing is a neglected area because it is often perceived as "an isolated exercise" (Jones 1999, p.38). Lea and Stierer (2000) argue that HE institutions still view the elements of "good writing" as a set of universal skills (e.g. grammar accuracy, text organisation, language usage) that once learned can be applied to other writing contexts. Similarly, Lea and Street (1998) stated that British HE institutions seemed to adhere to the principle of knowledge and skills transferability from one module to another, rather than perceiving writing as a knowledge-making process within a particular discipline. Thus, research revealed a series of assumptions

that indicated that HE institutions still tend to hold narrow views on academic writing and to give little attention to the teaching of academic writing. Arguably, this situation is no longer acceptable within the current environment where an increasing number of students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds enter HE (Coffin *et al.* 2003) and enjoy less contact with academic staff (Gourlay 2007). These changes mean that EAL students cannot be expected to learn writing conventions and to adopt new identities solely through exposure to the disciplinary knowledge or general advice on written tasks and/or to tutor written feedback. Hence, teaching academic writing and improving students' skills should be an urgent university priority (Bergstrom 2004).

### 2.6.3 Academic Writing as an Interactional Process

Of great importance to this study are the seminal studies on disciplinary writing (Prior 1991; Casanave 1995; Riazi 1997) that shed light on the range of interactional practices and activities students engaged in when completing disciplinary assignments. Taken as a whole, their findings suggested that disciplinary writing occurred in a complex context characterised by individual, contextual and social factors. Such factors as tutors' values, student-tutor relationships, writing tasks, feedback, students' motivation, learning strategies, previous writing and educational experiences appeared to have a considerable impact on their writing.

More specifically, Casanave (1995) revealed that participants constructed their writing contexts based on three major interactional events: interacting with people in the immediate environment (tutors, peers, teacher-assistants, colleagues, senior students), with the system of training (core courses) and with disciplinary-based writing tasks.

Similarly to Prior (1991) and Riazi (1997), interactions with members of the discourse community served to communicate the values, norms and conventions privileged in the community that students were expected to apply in their tasks.

Additionally, the system of training was designed to provide students with opportunities (e.g. oral presentations, written papers) for intellectual discussion and for understanding the values embedded in their field. However, findings disclosed that the interactions between students' own beliefs and those embodied in the course training often generated tensions, ambiguities and uncertainties. Students occasionally resisted what they perceived as privileged values and beliefs taught by their tutors, preferring to incorporate less valued beliefs (Prior 1991; Casanave 1995). For instance, Casanave (1995) reported that some students strongly disagreed with the presumption that their subject of study (i.e. sociology) had to be approached from the perspective of natural sciences, which resulted in students embracing other less privileged perspectives in their field.

Prior (1991), Casanave (1995) and Riazi (1997) showed that disciplinary assignments constituted a vital means of introducing students to disciplinary, conceptual and methodological frameworks. Riazi (1997) portrayed the process of engaging with writing tasks as dynamic and interactive. Thus, the process of reconstructing the tasks entailed issues such as understanding the writing tasks, assigning goals and evoking cognitive, metacognitve, social and search strategies. Participants tended to merge the objectives of the tasks defined in the course outlines with their personal, educational and career perspectives. Depending on a given task, participants adopted specific strategies. For instance, viewing a writing task as unclear in terms of content and format prompted

them to search for appropriate examples they perceived as similar or relevant and to appeal for professors' and peers' clarification. This is consistent with the theory of community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) that suggests that novice writers needed opportunities for legitimate access to the knowledge and conventions of the given community. Clearly, learning to write in HE is a complex and interactional process encompassing not only writing and reading, but also a range of social interactions occurring between the novice and more expert members of the discourse community.

## 2.6.4 ACLITS Research on Academic Writing: Models of Academic Writing

The findings of ACLITS researchers have contributed greatly to understanding student writing. Two pedagogic models of academic writing have been suggested: one views writing as a personal act of meaning-making; the other regards writing as a demonstration of the acquisition of subject or disciplinary knowledge (Ivanič 1998; Lea 1998). Lea (1998) defined these models as the challenging and reformulation models.

To illustrate the differences between these models, I draw largely on Lea's (1998) study of the writing experiences of adult distance learners at a British university. Lea argued that the challenging model is largely transformatory. Indeed, students who opted for this approach were actively engaging with the course against their personal needs and broader cultural contexts. Students regarded course materials as challenges to their own interpretations and a starting point for more reflexive engagement with learning. Yet, Lea indicated that tutors frequently regarded this type of writing as incoherent and unstructured, failing to demonstrate that students had assimilated the disciplinary content and had applied it in their writing successfully.

In Russell *et al.'s* (2009) terms, the second model of writing is concerned with the control of disciplinary content. Lea revealed that students, who adopted a reformulation approach, interpreted the writing task as replicating academic texts and conceding to the authority of course materials. In this sense, students' main concern was to reproduce the features of privileged written genres. For instance, students saw the use of recognised terminology as a means of convincing tutors that they had mastered the academic discourse. These beliefs were reinforced by tutor feedback, which praised students for using particular disciplinary terminology and managing the transition from using everyday discourses to engaging with privileged discourses. However, Lea suggested that students seemed to have engaged in replicating the academic texts with little real commitment to the epistemological issues underpinning their course of studies.

Lea concluded that feedback, and therefore the process of assessment, defined what counted as good writing, actively encouraging the use of the reformulation approach. In other words, summative assessment criteria were linked to disciplinary benchmarks and dominant conventions that students were expected to identify and adopt in their writing. When students referred to wider contexts, their work was regarded as irrelevant. These findings are central to the current research, as they illuminated students' attempts at meaning-making processes when completing their writing tasks.

Interestingly, Lea presented these models of academic writing as a dichotomy; whereas Ivanič (1998, p.32) regarded them as two potential approaches to completing writing tasks. Ivanič conceptualised academic writing as the following:

> writing is an act of identity in which people align themselves with socio-culturally shaped possibilities for self-hood, playing their part in *reproducing or challenging* dominant practices and discourses, and the values, beliefs and interests which they embody. (italics added)

According to this conceptualisation, these models are defined as alternative means of constructing academic knowledge. I agree that both models are acceptable approaches to writing as long as students manage to connect the meaning-making processes to the disciplinary knowledge and values.

### 2.6.5 ACLITS Research on Institutional Practices and on Forms of Provision

The work of ACLITS researchers placed academic writing in broader institutional contexts, taking account of their cultural and epistemological underpinnings to investigate important issues concerning student writing (Russell *et al.* 2009). More specifically, some studies (Lea & Street 1998, 2000; Ivanič 1998; Hermerschmidt 1999; Stierer 2000) indicated that institutions defined and delineated the conventions and boundaries of their literacy practices through their procedures, regulations (definitions of plagiarism, requirements of modularity and assessment procedures, etc.) and their forms of provision. These practices enhanced or compromised the ways in which students were able to read, understand and make use of them. For instance, Lea and Street (1998) revealed that in one university students tended to receive feedback on written work after module completion. Students found themselves in situations where they were well into the second module when they received feedback for their first assignment. As a result, feedback practices became less meaningful for informing their subsequent assignments.

Moreover, a number of studies (Lea & Street 1998, 2000; English 1999; Hermerschmidt 1999; Lillis 1999; Stierer 2000; Catt & Gregory 2006) argued that institutions provided

students with little help to access academic conventions specific to the context and assignment. Lillis (1999, p.127) pointed to an "institutional practice of mystery" in disclosing the privileged conventions and values to students who were less familiar with them. These studies indicated that students were likely to be introduced to academic standards and values through written guidelines available in module handbooks, rather than coached by more experienced members of the discourse community. Published guidelines were criticised for their lack of specificity in setting and explaining task requirements (Lea & Street 1998; Stierer 2000; Catt & Gregory 2006). In particular, they tended to adopt a technical approach to writing, focusing on issues of form, grammar, punctuation, referencing, bibliographies and warnings about plagiarism (Lea & Street 1998). Not surprisingly, students reported that such guidelines did not help them to understand and present disciplinary knowledge for a particular module.

Additionally, these issues of setting requirements for student writing revealed a deep confusion at the level of epistemology. Thus, Stierer (2000) examined the assignment booklets for modules in a Masters of Arts programme and concluded that there was no consistency or consensus across the programme regarding the disciplinary knowledge expected in student writing. Shay (2008) argued that nowadays assessment practices conceal whether disciplinary knowledge or knowledge-making practices are being judged. Stierer stated that the unwillingness of academic staff to make explicit the privileged disciplinary knowledge suggested that either they did not consider this aspect essential or they did not recognise the importance of making their aims transparent to students.

The research on academic writing concluded that students, regardless of cultural and prior educational background, were being marginalised rather than helped to participate actively in the academic community (Lea & Street 1998; Stierer 2000). In the light of Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning, students encountered difficulties in moving from peripheral to active participation due to inadequate provision and coaching. Seen from this perspective, academic writing in HE should be considered as an institutional issue and not just an individual's problem (Lea & Street 1998). Additionally, research raised fundamental issues of assessment practices, power differential and of identity. These aspects will be explored in the next sections.

### 2.6.6 ACLITS Research on Assessment Practices

Another important issue that the work of the ACLITS researchers raised is the debate over assessment practices and their effect on student learning (Russell *et al.* 2009). In researching feedback practices, ACLITS has highlighted some essential preconceptions and hidden agendas in the setting and implementation of marking criteria.

A range of studies (Rust 2002; Rust *et al.* 2003, 2005; O'Donovan *et al.* 2004; Bloxham & West 2007; Shay 2008) criticised the practice of explicit presentation of assessment criteria and grade descriptors. These studies argued that there is little evidence to suggest that explicit instruction contributed to students learning of assessment standards. Instead, they argued that an over-reliance on explicit assessment criteria is not sufficient to develop a shared understanding of assessment between staff and students. Some even ascertained that making assessment criteria more explicit may have a detrimental effect on student learning (Norton 2004). Paradoxically, this approach may encourage students

to adopt a strategic approach to learning, perceiving assessment tasks as obstacles to overcome in the pursuit of grades (Norton 2004; Bloxham & West 2007; Greasley & Cassidy 2010).

With reference to the literature on assessment practices, these contradictory findings have roots in the ways in which the assessment criteria are articulated. For example, the term criterion means different things in different contexts (Shay 2008). In some cases criteria refer to the desirable qualities, in other cases they refer to required standards of achievement. Moreover, the assessment criteria do not always indicate weighting, i.e. the comparative importance of one criterion in relation to other criteria (Shay 2008). This is compounded by tutors who appear to display varying conceptual preferences, values and writing features when marking assignments. Lea and Street (1998) identified tutors' individuality, their previous professional experience and disciplinary traditions as factors influencing how they conceptualised the most successful elements of student writing.

Next, assessment criteria are not always linked to benchmarks or exemplification materials to clarify what different criteria mean. Empirical studies showed that although there was broad agreement on academic writing conventions, there was a variety of interpretations of student writing across courses, disciplines and modules (Lea & Street 1998; Lillis 1999; Stierer 2000). More specifically, criteria such as analysis, criticality and persuasive argumentation appeared to have different interpretations in different contexts (Lea & Street 1998; O'Donovan *et al.* 2004). These findings agree with the view that the elements of 'good writing' are connected to particular ways of constructing

disciplinary knowledge, which in fact seem to be disregarded when communicating assessment criteria and task requirements to students (Lea & Street 1998).

It follows from this evidence that students have to learn how to write for each tutor and module. Lea and Street showed that students who relied on transferring ways of knowing and writing from one course to another were often unsuccessful. Students acknowledged that what seemed to be appropriate in one discipline or for one tutor could be inappropriate for another context or tutor. This situation may generate confusion amongst students who are not yet familiar with disciplinary traditions and who have to acquire them as they learn the subject.

In line with these findings, many studies (Rust *et al.* 2003, 2005; O'Donovan *et al.* 2004; Shay 2008) call for opportunities for active engagement with the criteria, which can enable students' understanding and application of assessment criteria. It has been shown that marking exercises, where students use the criteria in marking samples of work and then discuss them both with other students and tutors (Rust *et al.* 2003) and peer marking of actual student work (Rust 2002; Ellery 2008), result in statistically significant improvements in students' subsequent writing. Accordingly, literacy practices based on dialogue, imitation, feedback, discussion and one-to-one or small group tutorials may develop a shared understanding of assessment criteria, thereby improving student academic performance. This improvement may last over time and be transferable, at least within similar contexts (Rust *et al.* 2003, 2005). Nevertheless, these approaches may be problematic, if not impossible, in the context of today's rapid expansion of student populations and cuts in university resources (Ryan 2000; Rust *et al.*

2003; Carroll & Ryan 2005). Thus, a basic assertion of ACLITS research is to address all the texts in the academy, not just student writing but also the institutional artefacts such as the assessment criteria and guidelines (Russell *et al*. 2009).

### *2.6.7 ACLITS Research on Identity*

The work of ACLITS researchers suggested that there is a relationship between student writing and identity (Ivanič 1998; Lea 1998; Hermerschmidt 1999). Arguably, classrooms in HE institutions and academic writing serve as sites where students construct their identities (Hermerschmidt 1999). Student writing entails conflicts of identity as students struggle with the privileged discourses of the university and its different socio-cultural settings (Ivanič 1998). To explore the notion of identity, I draw extensively on Ivanič's (1998) study of how students constructed their identities in the act of writing. Ivanič proposed a useful framework for conceptualising the identity of a student writer by drawing on the distinction between the 'autobiographical self'', the 'discoursal self'' and the 'self as author'. These three 'selves' are socially constructed by and socially constructing the more abstract 'possibilities for self-hood', which exist in the given discourse community (Ivanič 1998).

With reference to Ivanič's work, the autobiographical self relates to the identity that students bring to the act of writing in the form of previous experience, knowledge and skills. The term captures not only the events in students' lives, but also their way of representing these experiences to themselves. The discoursal self is concerned with the impression of himself/herself that the writer wishes to convey in writing. It is constructed through the discourse features of a written text, which relates to values,

beliefs and power relations in the social context in which it is written. The self as author is associated with the idea of authorial 'voice' and the opinions, beliefs and positioning that students feel they can establish in their writing. Some students tend to concede to the authority of others, effacing themselves completely; others take up a strong authorial stance. The fourth notion of writer identity refers to the institutional context and the opportunities for self-hood available to writers. Ivanič suggested that in any institutional context there are several socially available possibilities for self-hood that are privileged over others. In this sense, students adopt the privileged discourses or reject them to enact what they want to bring to the debate.

Findings indicated that when students engaged in writing they not only answered the task questions but also created a discoursal self, which mitigated the tensions between the autobiographical self they brought to the setting and the possibilities for self-hood available in the discourse community they wrote for (Ivanič 1998). The negotiation of the possibilities for self-hood appeared to be fraught with deep affective and ideological conflicts with the roles and values students brought to the course of study, which caused transformations in students' sense of identity (Ivanič 1998; Hermrschmidt 1999; Northedge 2003). Thus, Ivanič revealed that students felt under pressure to accommodate particular values, knowledge, beliefs and practices valued in their discourse community. Sometimes they felt so strongly against particular beliefs and reader expectations that they rejected them, opting for less prestigious discourses. These findings argue that students' rejection of what is valued in the community may result from a mismatch between their prior experiences and identities and their new social context, rather than their poor abilities (Ivanič 1998; Lea 1998; Lea & Street 1998;

Stierer 2000). These observations raised questions about writer identity and its implications for the departmental agenda in the teaching and learning of academic writing. Clearly, many students bring their autobiographical selves to the act of writing, which may be ignored by the discourse community and which can generate crises of confidence and identity within students.

In summary, the work of ACLITS has contributed greatly to the conceptual and analytical framework of the current study. It raised important issues surrounding student writing that provided tools of examining and describing the researched phenomena. Next, I will address EAL students' perceptions of different types of feedback.

## 2.7 Contexts and Issues in Feedback on EAL Students' Writing

### 2.7.1 Introduction

The next sections introduce the concept of feedback as a potentially useful means of introducing EAL students to writing conventions specific to their discourse community. All the studies reported in these sections explored primarily EAL students' perceptions of different types of feedback. They also examined how EAL students read and responded to feedback.

Feedback is widely recognised in education as a crucial means of promoting and consolidating students' learning and of developing their writing skills (Black & Wiliam 1998; Ferris 2003; Hyland & Hyland 2006b). The literature on assessment advocates that feedback is designed to offer students responses to their writing that show them where their textual goals have been achieved and where they may have fallen short.

Also, it has to recommend action plans for improvement, so students can meet community's expectations (Radecki & Swales 1988; Enginarlar 1993; Ferris 1995, 1997; Hyland & Hyland 2006b). Therefore, students are given learning opportunities to act upon comments and advice to further revise their writing and reinforce newly-acquired writing behaviours (Hyland & Hyland 2001).

### 2.7.2 EAL Students' Perceptions of Teacher Feedback

There is an increasing body of empirical studies that has investigated EAL students' perceptions of feedback practices and their responses to teacher feedback during revision processes (Radecki & Swales 1988; Chapin & Terdal 1990; Goldstein & Conrad 1990; Enginarlar 1993; Hedgcock & Leftkowitz 1994; Brice 1995; Ferris 1995, 1997; Hyland 1998; Conrad & Goldstein 1999; Ellis 2009). These studies indicate that EAL students greatly value teacher written and oral feedback on all aspects of their texts. For instance, Radecki and Swales (1988) examined 59 NNS students' reactions to feedback provided in ESL-oriented writing classes. They found that the majority of students were positive about receiving a heavily marked paper whatever the nature of the markings. They also appreciated substantive comments that allowed them to rethink their writing. The study indicated that participants thought that effective feedback should encompass comments on linguistic errors, compositional skills and evaluative comments on the content and quality of their writing.

Despite the findings that suggested that feedback plays an important role in developing EAL students' writing skills, research indicates that teacher feedback "may have more

limited impact on the learners than the teachers would desire" (Radecki & Swales 1988).

Furthermore, Hyland and Hyland (2006a, p.1) add that even if:

> Feedback is a central aspect of ESL writing programs across the world, the research literature has not been unequivocally positive about its role in instruction, and teachers often have a sense they are not making use of its full potential.

A number of studies revealed variations amongst EAL students in how they used teachers' commentary and how successful the subsequent changes were (Chapin & Terdal 1990; Conrad & Goldstein 1999; Ferris 1995, 1997; Hyland 1998, 2000; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris 1997). Further, findings showed that there was a variation in how much students felt they had understood both their teachers' commentary and the reasons behind the requests for change (Brice 1995; Ferris 1995; Hyland 1998; Tardy 2006). Indeed, even when students did understand a comment, they encountered difficulties in deciding upon the correct revising strategy (Chapin & Terdal 1993; Conrad & Goldstein 1999). Other studies reported that sometimes students thought they had understood a comment when they had not; consequently, they were more likely to revise unsuccessfully (Hyland 1998; Goldstein 2004).

In more specific terms, Ferris (1997) examined the effects of teachers' written feedback on 47 ESL students' drafts and assessed whether revisions led to substantive and effective changes in their written work. She reported that generally students tended to make fairly substantive changes in response to teachers' comments. Accordingly, one third of these comments generated positive substantive changes in students' papers. However, over a third of the marginal comments and half of the end comments resulted in no change, indicating that far too frequently students avoided or ignored requests for further revisions. Ferris argued that the nature of comments accounted for the

differences in the success of students' revisions. Thus, ESL students made the most substantial revisions when the comments requested specific information regardless of its syntactic form (i.e. questions, statements) and/or provided summary comments on grammar. In contrast, less influential comments were questions or statements that provided students with teachers' opinions on their ideas, structure and/or asked for further information. On these occasions, students were less likely to perform any revisions or they revised unsuccessfully.

Although feedback should enhance students' understanding of writing tasks, ironically, research suggests that certain interactions might generate confusion and uncertainty within students. In a paper on teacher written feedback and student revision, Goldstein (2004, p.71) delineates possible reasons why multilingual students misconstrue feedback and employ it unsuccessfully when revising. These include:

- a lack of willingness to critically examine one's point of view,

- feeling that the teacher's feedback is incorrect,

- lack of time to do the revisions,

- lack of content knowledge to do the revisions,

- feeling that the feedback is not reasonable,

- lack of motivation,

- being resistant to revision,

- ▪ feeling distrustful of the teacher's content knowledge, and

- ▪ mismatches between the teachers' responding behaviours and the students' needs and desires.

There are many studies that have tried to identify the types of comments EAL students value the most. Findings suggested that they greatly valued moderate amounts of encouraging comments, but also expected to receive helpful criticism rather than mere platitudes (Brinko 1993; Ferris 1995; Hyland 1998; Hyland & Hyland 2001, 2006a; Goldstein 2004). They appeared to disregard formulaic positive comments that served only to tone down criticism (Hyland & Hyland 2001). Brinko (1993) concluded that generally positive feedback is more accurately perceived and recalled than criticism. However, students given only positive feedback tend to become complacent and fail to identify learning goals for further improvement. Based on Bandura's (1986) concept of self-efficacy, it is crucial to praise EAL students, particularly less able writers, for using certain writing and/or revising strategies effectively. Praise can help students to reinforce appropriate writing behaviours, foster their self-beliefs as academic writers (Hyland & Hyland 2001) and heighten their motivation (Goldstein 2004).

### 2.7.3 Miscommunications within Feedback

Another potential reason why EAL students misconstrue feedback is the type of language tutors employ when providing commentary. Hyland and Hyland (2001) acknowledge that teachers are conscious of the potentially damaging effect of too many critical comments on students' motivation and self-confidence, which often leads them to address textual problems using indirect language. As a result, teachers often seek to

mitigate subtly the full force of their criticisms and requests, toning them down by using hedges, question forms and personal attribution to make the criticism more acceptable (Hyland & Hyland 2001, 2006b). Clarifications of terms such as hedges and personal attribution comments are presented in Appendix 2.3.

There have been few attempts to determine the extent of this problem. However, several case studies have provided examples where EAL students failed to understand or only partly understood tutors' mitigated comments (Ferris 1997; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris 1997; Conrad & Goldstein 1999; Hyland & Hyland 2001, 2006b). These studies indicated how participants sometimes misinterpreted the intent of teachers' comments that did not directly state that a revision was needed. As a result, they either did not attempt any revision or revised unsuccessfully.

Hyland and Hyland (2001, 2006b) indicate that mitigated comments appear to be a source of particular confusion for EAL learners of low English proficiency as they may be less familiar with the phenomenon of indirectness in English. Ferris (1997) revealed that even advanced learners might encounter difficulties in understanding all the implied remarks. It has been suggested that indirectness is used for politeness in English (Ferris 1997) and it is also employed for disguising stylistically the power differential between tutors and students (Patthey-Chavez & Ferris 1997).

### 2.7.4 Contextual Factors and Individual Differences in EAL Students' Response to Feedback

Contextual factors and EAL students' individual differences may influence the way in which tutors provide feedback and EAL students read and respond to it. In this vein,

Conrad and Goldstein (1999) ascertained that factors such as content knowledge, strongly-held beliefs, course context and the pressure of other commitments may account for success or the lack of it in students' revisions. Besides, such factors as students' previous writing experiences, their preferences for certain academic practices (Hyland & Hyland 2006a) and their attitudes towards the teacher, class, writing assignment and commentary itself (Goldstein 2004) may influence how students understand and make use of tutors' feedback.

As far as tutor-related factors are concerned, Goldstein (2004) refers to tutor personality, their pedagogical beliefs about how to comment, attitudes towards specific student characteristics, attitudes towards and knowledge of the content about which students are writing, expectations of students at a particular level and expectations of particular students. Furthermore, institutional attitudes towards writing and EAL students can greatly affect how teachers provide feedback and how students respond (Goldstein 2004). For instance, Goldstein argues that in settings where the writing of EAL students and what they say is highly valued, teachers are encouraged to address the content and rhetorical concerns such as purpose, audience and organization. In settings where writing is seen as an exercise in developing students' grammatical and language expertise, the purpose of instruction and response is primarily the development of linguistic competence and grammatical accuracy. Moreover, contextual factors such as the required number of words, papers, outline submissions and drafts may also exert strong pressure on teacher commentary and student revision. This view on researching feedback is consistent with the sociocultural theories that regard feedback as a

communicative event situated in a particular context, characterised by a range of social and interpersonal factors that may impact on the provision and use of feedback.

### 2.7.5 Some Limitations of Existing Research

Although these studies contributed to understanding (a) EAL students' perceptions of tutors' feedback and (b) the usefulness of feedback in terms of text revision, they can be criticised on a number of grounds.

Firstly, many studies failed to report on the analytic and/or data collection methods used (Ferris 1997). The studies adopted an array of data collection instruments (surveys, textual analyses of drafts, interviews); different forms of design (longitudinal versus cross-sectional); various sample sizes (from 3 to 59 participants); differing strategies for providing feedback during the term or over a longer span of time. Therefore, it appears that each study tended to be "fairly unique, in which uniqueness is defined by a combination of the research questions asked, the methodology employed, and the context of the study" (Goldstein 2001, p.77).

Additionally, many studies focused on feedback that primarily addressed form rather than content or organisation of the written assignments (Zamel 1985; Chapin & Terdal 1990; Hyland 1998; Ellis 2009). For instance, in Chapin and Terdal's study (1990), over half of the teachers' comments (64%) addressed syntax, orthography and punctuation issues; one fifth (20%) dealt with lexical items; less than one fifth (15%) of comments referred to content and just 1% addressed organisation issues.

Furthermore, most of the research has focused on feedback provided by writing instructors within ESL writing centres (Zamel 1985; Radecki & Swales 1988; Chapin & Terdal 1990), EFL contexts (Enginarlar 1993) and writing classes for university students (Brice 1995; Ferris 1997; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris 1997). This area deserves further attention. In the next section, I will introduce some empirical studies that explored how EAL students read and responded to disciplinary feedback.

### 2.7.6 EAL Students' Perceptions of Disciplinary Feedback

This section discusses a small number of studies (Prior 1991; Belcher 1994; Casanave 1995; Riazi 1997; Hyland 1998; Leki 2006) that have addressed how EAL students responded to disciplinary tutors' feedback and how they functioned as academic writers in their discourse community.

Taken as a whole, these studies suggested that academic staff tended to provide detailed feedback that responded primarily to content rather than linguistic and/or rhetorical issues. For instance, Riazi (1997) reported that tutors primarily provided feedback on the content, language and organization of the written texts. Tutors' comments on the content included encouraging words or phrases (e.g. "good", "very well done", "good points"), negative comments ("unfocused", "lacks critical analysis") and some comments suggesting ways to improve the texts ("more examples will be useful", "more explanation will help"). Similarly to the studies conducted in ESL centres, this work confirmed that EAL students valued greatly the feedback on their disciplinary assignments. Indeed, students strongly believed that linguistic, rhetorical and content-based commentaries helped them to improve their texts and to acquire L2 writing

knowledge, disciplinary knowledge and L2 knowledge. Furthermore, they reported that tutors' feedback enhanced their participation within the discourse communities, and this has not been documented in studies conducted within ESL centres.

However, these studies can be critiqued for focusing on the impact of a single type of feedback, e.g. tutors' written feedback (Prior 1991; Leki 2006). Nowadays, university students tend to receive tutor oral feedback, peer feedback and electronic feedback. None of these studies examined the role of different feedback practices students engaged with, which requires further investigation. The next sections will introduce some insights about electronic feedback, writing conferences and peer feedback.

### *2.7.7 EAL Students' Perceptions of Electronic Feedback*

Over the past three decades, feedback practices have been extended to incorporate peer feedback, writing workshops, writing conferences and computer-delivered feedback (Hyland & Hyland 2006a). The literature on academic writing suggests that there is an increase in the employment of educational technologies to provide ongoing support during writing processes that merge into the concept of electronic feedback. As Ware and Warschauer (2006, p.105) warn, electronic feedback is "a slippery term that covers a range of often dissimilar approaches to the teaching of writing". Therefore, depending on each tutor's perspectives and pedagogical framework, electronic feedback may indicate automated feedback generated by software systems or it may designate the use of an electronic medium to supply human feedback.

In this study, I use the term electronic feedback to refer to computer-mediated human feedback such as e-mail correspondence and/or attachments containing comments inserted with the help of the Comment function in Microsoft Word. This choice was informed mainly by the array of educational technologies employed at the institute where I conducted my research. In this setting, tutors often required students to submit their outlines of written work and drafts of dissertations electronically, so they could provide them with electronic feedback.

A number of studies have investigated the effects of computer-mediated human feedback, particularly peer electronic feedback, on EAL students' written work (Hewett 2000; Tuzi 2004; Goldstein 2006; Milton 2006; Ware & Warschauer 2006; Guardado & Shi 2007). Taken as a whole, research showed that electronic feedback was beneficial in terms of providing both tutors and students with facilities for submitting, retrieving and responding to written work online, eliminating the logistical problems of carrying papers around and potential losses. The data also suggested that electronic feedback influenced EAL writers' revisions at a content level such as changing existing text to clarify meaning or add new information. Yet, findings reported that the success of these interactions might be explained by the training student-writers had received in providing quality computer-mediated feedback and in assisting their peers with improving their papers.

However, there is a limited number of studies that have addressed the effects of teachers' feedback provided through electronic means (e.g. e-mail or the Comment function in Microsoft Word) on the success of EAL students' revisions (Goldstein

2006). Goldstein and Kohls (2002 cited in Goldstein 2006) reported on three undergraduate students who had to revise in response to tutors' electronic feedback. The data showed that electronic feedback applied directly to students' drafts played a relatively minor role in how these students subsequently revised their work. The limited research in this area requires further investigation into the reasons why electronic feedback has limited effects.

### 2.7.8 EAL Students' Perceptions of Writing Conferences

In this section, I argue that writing conferences can provide valuable tools for introducing writing conventions and revising written texts. The definition of writing conferences used in this study is that of a small group or individualised interaction where the tutor introduces the task requirements and writing conventions and students discuss their written work. However, in the following chapters I will also use the term tutorials to designate writing conferences – a term largely applied within WIE.

Interest in writing conferences is grounded in the Vygotskian concept of scaffolding, community of practice theory and the cognitive apprenticeship model. Writing conferences involve dialogues in which participants constantly negotiate the meanings of their written work (Hyland & Hyland 2006a), providing them with opportunities "to control the interaction, actively participate, and clarify their teachers' responses" (Goldstein & Conrad 1990, p.443). Patthey-Chavez and Ferris (1997) defined these encounters as a platform where teacher meets novice writers to address issues with their written work and to provide uniquely tailored verbal support to encourage them to refine their texts. Essentially, tutors act as facilitators to enable students to succeed in

producing good quality assignments and as gatekeepers to the privileged discourses (Weissberg 2006).

A number of empirical studies (Prior 1991; Casanave 1995; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris 1997; Hyland & Lo 2006) indicated that writing conferences may offer students the necessary tools to clarify tutors' comments, writing tasks and conventions valued in their discourse community. For instance, Patthey-Chavez and Ferris (1997) explored the discourses surrounding teacher-student writing conferences conducted by four teachers with eight ESL students. Findings revealed that there were both quantitative and qualitative differences between the conferences with students, identified by their teachers as strong or weak writers. The conferences with strong writers were longer (i.e. in time and number of words) and comprised a more even distribution of talking between teachers and students. The strong writers appeared to be more assertive about expressing viewpoints, eliciting teacher feedback and directing the conference than the weak students were. Further, the strong students produced more substantial revisions that made their texts more acceptable.

On the other hand, the weaker students revised their drafts according to their teachers' suggestions. However, it appeared that they simply transferred the suggestions verbatim into final drafts with no further revision of similar textual issues. As a result, their revisions were labelled 'unsuccessful' or 'less effective' than those of the stronger students. Essentially, this study suggested that not all students benefitted equally from these interactions and they did not necessarily lead to revision and, when revision occurred, it was not always successful.

A limitation of this research is that most empirical findings emerged from participants' perceptions and impressions, pointing out that "none of the research has examined the discourse that takes place in conferences or the relationship between this discourse and subsequent revision for these writers" (Goldstein & Conrad 1990, p.443). This criticism supports some empirical evidence that showed that writing conferences had little or no effect on EAL students' writing. For instance, Goldstein and Conrad (1990) conducted a study that investigated the experiences of one tutor and three ESL students participating in writing conferences. This work indicated that students did not actively participate in conferences and make substantial contributions. Generally, teachers generated most of the input, did most of the conversational work and used questions to engage students in interactions. Only one conference illustrated the participant contributing equally to the topic nominations, questions and conversation.

Empirical studies (Goldstein & Conrad 1990; Hyland & Hyland 2006a; Hyland & Lo 2006) identified several issues with writing conferences specific to EAL students. Hyland and Lo (2006) acknowledged that these discourse practices can entail a face threatening situation for EAL students. The authors argued that EAL students are not always in the best position to take advantage of individualised attention and discuss their writing face-to-face with teachers. According to Goldstein and Conrad (1990) and Hyland and Hyland (2006a), students may lack prior experience of engaging in such encounters. They also may lack interactive abilities or aural comprehension skills to benefit from them. Due to cultural or social inhibitions about engaging informally with teachers whom they see as authority figures (Goldstein & Conrad 1990), EAL students may have strong reservations about questioning tutors and they may decide to

incorporate tutors' suggestions into their work unreflectively. Hyland and Lo (2006) suggest that in Chinese societies, the Confucian hierarchical concept of the role of the teacher may lead students to view their teacher as an authority figure whose opinions should be respected and not openly questioned. Furthermore, it might be a face threatening experience as students operate in an environment where they have to use their second or even a foreign language.

Despite mixed perceptions of the role of writing conferences in EAL students' writing development, this study suggests that writing conferences are valuable tools for clarifying writing tasks, writing conventions and requirements. The use of such literacy practices is supported by Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of community of practice, which indicates that students learn the values and conventions of a particular community through active engagement with its more experienced members and artefacts. Essentially, this area deserves further consideration, particularly in terms of the features that make writing conferences unsuccessful.

### 2.7.9 EAL Students' Perceptions of Peer Feedback

During the last two decades, peer feedback has become a common feature in both L1 and L2 settings (Liu & Hansen 2002). The interest in peer feedback is reflected in a large number of studies investigating the effects of peer feedback on EAL students' writing and the improvement of their writing skills. The enthusiasm for peer feedback is grounded in a theoretical framework that emphasises the social nature of language, knowledge-making, collaborative learning theory and writing theory (Vygotsky 1978; Flower & Hayes 1980; Bruffee 1984).

Hyland and Hyland (2006a) define peer feedback as a formative developmental process that gives writers the opportunity to discuss and to discover other interpretations of their texts. Liu and Hansen (2002) state that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally performed by a tutor to comment upon and critique each other's drafts in both written and oral formats. Zhu (2001) advocates that peer feedback constitutes a viable tool of teaching writing and has the potential to help students to develop audience awareness and to improve their writing. Mangelsdorf (1992, p.275) concluded that peer feedback represents a powerful learning tool that can:

- provide students with an authentic audience,

- increase students' motivation for writing,

- enable students to receive different views on their writing,

- help students to learn to read their own writing critically,

- assist students in gaining confidence in their writing.

Despite the extensive theoretical support, the accumulated empirical data suggests conflicting findings. On the one hand, many studies (Keh 1990; Mendonça & Johnson 1994; Jacobs *et al.* 1998; Berg 1999; Paulus 1999; Muncie 2000; Tsui & Ng 2000; Min 2005) revealed evidence of the positive impact of peer feedback on further revision and on enhancing EAL students' writing skills. Findings suggested that writers who revised their essays in the light of their peers' comments developed "the crucial ability of re-viewing their writing with the eyes of another and allowed them to modify their written texts to meet the needs of their audience" (Mendonça & Johnson 1994, p.766).

For instance, Paulus (1999) established that under a third (32%) of the amendments made to second drafts of essays, written immediately after receiving only peer feedback, were a result of that feedback. Furthermore, he found that a majority (63%) of the second draft peer-influenced revisions was meaning changes, showing that students reflected upon their peer comments and used them to revise their writing. The findings also showed that peer feedback was used almost as often as teachers' feedback, accounting for a third (34%) of the total revisions. However, as Jacobs *et al.* (1998) argued, any effort to establish the superiority of one over the other seems to be erroneous. The roles played by the teacher and the peers are complementary and they can work together for the students' benefit.

On the other hand, a number of studies (Leki 1990; Connor & Asenavage 1994; Zhang 1995; Nelson & Carson 1998; Zhu 2001) suggested that there are strong reservations about the effectiveness of EAL students' comments on text revision. Primarily, these studies illustrated students' tendencies to respond to surface problems and mechanical errors at the expense of more meaningful issues such as the development of ideas, organisation or the overall focus of what they are writing. They also reported that students provided unconstructive and unhelpful advice to their peers. For instance, Connor and Asenavage (1994) revealed that although the research participants made large amendments to their texts, a relatively small number of revisions were triggered by peer response (i.e. peer comments triggered 6% of the total number of changes in group 1 and 1% of total cases in group 2). Additionally, Nelson and Carson (1998) revealed that students focused particularly on discovering sentence-level problems, perceiving their task as detecting grammatical errors rather than problems of meaning.

The dynamics of peer response are very complex and are characterized by a series of recursive communicative activities and social behaviours that, if overlooked, may result in students' failure and withdrawal. It is suggested that some problems with peer feedback are specific to EAL writers (Zhu 2001). Such factors as students' language proficiency and cultural background may constrain their participation in peer feedback. EAL learners may encounter difficulties when commenting on peer writing in a language in which they are still developing their skills and when they need to respond to the various communication styles of peers who come from different cultures. They also have to cope with "different attitudes toward working in groups and different expectations concerning group norms" (Nelson & Murphy 1992, p.173). For instance, some studies (Nelson & Murphy 1992; Carson & Nelson 1994) stated that the function of a peer-response group in China and Japan is to serve the needs of the whole group; whereas in the U.S. it serves the needs of individual writers. Likewise, Nelson and Carson (1998) reported that students from countries such as China depended on group consensus to guide decisions about making changes to their final drafts. On occasions when students received differing opinions on a matter, they did not respond to that particular comment. These EAL students appeared reluctant to speak because they did not want to embarrass writers and aimed to create a positive group climate and maintain harmonious group relations. Nelson and Carson (2006) concluded that some EAL students view the dynamics of peer feedback groups as being antithetical to their values and goals. However, as was mentioned earlier, it is erroneous to assume that particular groups of students or, indeed, individuals will behave in certain ways in accordance with their cultural differences (Spack 1997).

Although a number of studies on peer feedback indicated mixed results, literature suggests that peer feedback can be beneficial for EAL writers provided that they are trained in offering peer feedback and structuring peer feedback sessions (Nelson & Murphy 1992; Stanley 1992; Jacobs *et al.* 1998; Berg 1999; Min 2005). These studies proposed several training procedures that aim to build constructive and positive interactions among students. Empirical findings pointed out that trained participants, regardless of their proficiency level, demonstrated a greater level of student engagement in the task of evaluation, more productive communication about writing and greater writing improvement in revised drafts.

Hyland, F. (2000) indicated in her study on peer conferencing that the aspects of peer feedback mentioned most positively by respondents were informal peer support mechanisms. Most interactions functioned mainly at the affective level and did not involve providing comments on completed drafts. Instead, students turned to one another for support and advice on understanding task requirements, language and vocabulary problems. Hyland, F. (2000) suggested that encouraging spontaneous peer talk during the writing process was a better strategy than using formal peer feedback sheets. By contrast, the formal feedback sessions, where students had to follow the written guidelines, appeared to lose their meaning as a communicative event becoming just another class task where the teacher controlled peer interactions.

Based on these findings, it is crucial to draw upon diverse resources and opportunities where EAL students can negotiate and construct the disciplinary literacy. As Nelson and Carson (2006, p.43) have pointed out, "self, peer, tutor, and teacher feedback are not

mutually exclusive categories and that multiple types of feedback including peer feedback are useful for students". This quotation infers that a discourse community needs to provide a range of literacy practices where students can learn the privileged academic conventions.

## 2.8 Summary

This chapter has reviewed a range of studies on academic writing in HE, delineating the fundamental theories and concepts that underpinned this study. The theoretical framework included: sociocultural learning theories, the concepts of community of practice, discourse community, self-efficacy beliefs, the sociocognitive apprenticeship model, attribution theory and ACLITS. Taken as a whole, these theories provided valuable tools to investigate EAL students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers.

Central to the present work is the ACLITS approach and studies of ACLITS researchers that emphasised the complex processes that underlie student writing. The ACLITS approach enabled me to place student writing in a broader framework for discussing factors such as institutional practices, academic staff' perspectives and students' individual characteristics, which all interact in complex ways. Additionally, this approach raised fundamental issues such as power relations and identities.

The literature review has shown that learning to write disciplinary assignments is an interactional and dynamic process, encompassing not only writing and reading but also many literacy practices and social interactions occurring among novice and more experienced members of the discourse community. However, these studies suggested

that HE institutions still tend to hold narrow views on academic writing and give little attention to the teaching of academic writing. The literature review has also identified gaps. Firstly, there has been limited research on how EAL students learn to write in a new academic community and what changes they undergo while completing disciplinary assignments. Secondly, many studies are limited because they have examined how isolated factors (i.e. tutors' feedback or use of guidelines) impacted on students' writing, but overlooked the complexity of interactions that came into play and influenced student writing. According to Grabe (2001), there has been no research on how various components determine differences in students' writing outcomes. Furthermore, literature indicated mixed results regarding how different literacy activities impacted on EAL students' writing. The ACLITS researchers also invited further research on the pedagogical significance of the application of ACLITS theory and research. Clearly, this suggests a need to explore which interactional activities and practices compromise or enhance students' understanding of writing conventions. Consequently, I regarded EAL students' experiences of learning to write at a British university as an important area of enquiry, particularly as it is recognised that many EAL students find academic writing within British HE unfamiliar and challenging.

From these perspectives, the current study aims to explore how EAL students learn the writing conventions and requirements expected by their new discourse community. It explores the complexity of literacy practices that comes into play and influences participants' views about academic writing and their self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers. The work focuses on what it is like to be an EAL writer engaging in disciplinary literacy and what changes in writer's perceptions occurred over the course of study.

Thus, it explores the writer's sense of self, of others, of situation, of purpose and their changes in their perceptions of academic writing.

The next chapter will present the epistemological and theoretical paradigms that informed the research design and data collection instruments.

# Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the epistemological and theoretical paradigms that informed the design and data collection instruments. The chapter also considers the rationale for choosing longitudinal case study as the key research method. Further, issues of validity and reliability are addressed. Finally, it details ethical issues and their implications for this study.

## 3.2 Research Design: Epistemological and Theoretical Paradigms

The current research was underpinned by constructivist and interpretivist paradigms, which sought to understand EAL students' writing experiences drawing on their meanings and interpretations of their context. The use of constructivism is grounded in the following presuppositions:

- the phenomenon under study, learning to write, is complex and situated in social interactions,

- it cannot be reduced to a set of "observable laws" such as technical skills participants need to complete assignments,

- the meanings are always social, arising while researcher interacts with participants and their context,

- the researcher engages with participants to understand the contexts based on their historical and social perspectives and on his/her own experience (Creswell 2003, p.8-9).

In the view of constructivism, truth and meaning "are created by the subject's interactions with the world" (Gray 2004, p.17).

Central to constructivism is interpretivism, which pursues "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Gray 2004, p.20). As Blaikie (2000, p.115) notes:

> Interpretivists are concerned with understanding the social world people have produced and which they reproduce through their continuing activities. This everyday reality consists of the meanings and interpretations given by the social actors to their actions, other people's actions, social situations, and natural and humanly created objects….in order to negotiate their way around their world and make sense of it, social actors have to interpret their activities together, and it is these meanings, embedded in language, that constitute their social reality.

This quote indicates that from an interpretivist perspective the social world can only be understood from participants' standpoint who are part of the phenomenon that is being investigated (Cohen & Manion 1989). Researchers have to construct the reality while interacting with participants (Robson 2002), relying extensively on their views of the situation (Creswell 2007). This study regards therefore participants' interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings as the primary data sources.

Of interest to the interpretivist paradigm is the tenet that emphasises the aspects of the social world "that are unique, individual and qualitative" (Crotty 1998, p.68). This research focused on aspects of writing which were unique, qualitative and context-sensitive. Thus, efforts were made to retain the integrity of students' writing experiences.

## 3.3 Methodology: Mixed Methods Design

A mixed methods approach was adopted to answer the research questions and objectives. Literature suggests that the mixed methods research has a short but prolific tradition, emerging as a separate orientation from qualitative and quantitative traditions during the past 20 years (Teddlie & Tashakkori 2009). This approach is defined as "a type of research design in which QUAL [qualitative] and QUAN [quantitative] approaches are used in types of questions, research methods, data collection and analysis procedures, and/or inferences" (Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003, p.711). Indeed, the current research entails a quantitative component that preceded the qualitative component. Accordingly, it started with the administration of a self-completion questionnaire to students taking Taught Masters Courses at WIE in October 2007. The questionnaire provided a holistic picture of Masters students' prior writing experiences and their self-efficacy beliefs as writers. It was then followed by a number of semi-structured interviews with five EAL students, which explored in-depth their perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as writers during the academic year 2007/08.

The mixed methods research tradition indicates several major reasons for linking qualitative and quantitative data: (a) to enable confirmation or corroboration of findings

via triangulation; (b) to elaborate or develop analysis, providing richer detail; and, (c) to initiate new lines of thinking through 'turning ideas around' and providing fresh insights (Rossman & Wilson 1991 cited in Miles & Huberman 1994, p.41). Furthermore, this design allows researchers to counteract the weaknesses of each component, drawing on their strengths (Bryman 2008). From this perspective, the rationale for conducting this mixed methods study laid mainly with bringing together a more comprehensive account of the phenomenon of academic writing.

Of great importance to the tradition of mixed methods research is pragmatism. Nevertheless, I preferred constructivism and interpretivism to pragmatism for a number of reasons. Firstly, pragmatism has been criticised for the vague notions it provides (Bergman 2008) and for no commitments to any systems of philosophy (Creswell 2003). Next, this tradition endorses the employment of different, even conflicting, theories and perspectives that best meet research purposes (Teddlie & Tashakkuri 2009). Consequently, these authors argue that mixed methods researchers end to include the epistemological, ontological and axiological differences that exist between qualitative and quantitative methods. This approach eventually contradicts the primary rationale for mixed methods research "by supposedly exploiting the strengths of each paradigm and by combining the respective strengths within one singe research design" (Bergman 2008, p.14). In the light of these criticisms, I considered that constructivist and interpretivist paradigms, which are normally associated with qualitative research, are the most suitable. Importantly, this research prioritises the qualitative component and I identify myself primarily as a qualitative researcher.

This project draws on a range of characteristics common for the mixed methods approach, which were derived from Bergman (2008) and Creswell (2007). These are:

- The centrality of a natural setting – the data was collected when participants engaged in authentic writing experiences.

- The centrality of participants' meanings – this research focused primarily on identifying the participants' views on the researched phenomenon.

- The tendency to work with a small, non-representative sample – five participants.

- A belief in the ability to describe the complexity of students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers.

- The significance of multiple sources of data collection such as interviews, self-completion questionnaire and analyses of tutors' feedback and module handbooks.

- The explicit focus on inductive and exploratory research approaches – the themes and categories were built from the 'bottom-up' by organising the data into more abstract units of information.

- The impossibility to generalise research findings beyond the limits of its immediate context.

It is crucial to be aware that the design can also pose challenges for researchers. Firstly, this design demands extensive data collection via multiple sources of data, which may be time-consuming and costly (Creswell 2003). Secondly, this study involves analysing

both textual and numerical data, which again might be time-consuming and requiring familiarity with both forms of inquiry (Bryman 2008). Essentially, mixed methods researchers might encounter difficulties in integrating the quantitative and qualitative findings in their work (Bryman 2008). To overcome these challenges, I attended classes on quantitative and qualitative research and worked on data analysis while collecting the data.

## 3.4 Case Study

In the light of the philosophical paradigms, research questions and objectives, the method most naturally suited for this research design was case study. The rationale for conducting a case study lies in its potential to retain "the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin 2003, p.3). It can penetrate in-depth a social phenomenon and interpret it from participants' viewpoint, which consequently may be described as interpretative and subjective accounts (Cohen *et al.* 2000; Widmer *et al.* 2008). Importantly, the data from case study is "strong in reality" and may form an archive of descriptive material for subsequent reinterpretation and use in similar cases (Bassey 1999, p.59).

Yin (2003) argues that case studies are the preferred empirical method when (a) 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed; (b) researchers have little control over events; (c) they investigate a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. This case study strove to portray "what it is like" to be a Masters student taking a course in Education, "to catch the close-up reality" of completing writing assignments and to present "thick description of participants' lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for a

situation" (Cohen *et al.* 2007, p.254). Case study was thus chosen to capture detailed and descriptive accounts of five EAL students' writing experiences and self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers. Each of the five cases was included in a multiple-case study that is described below.

### 3.4.1 The Multiple-Case Study

The logic of deploying multiple-case study lies with its potential to generate valuable evidence that makes the study more robust (Yin 2003) and adds confidence to findings (Miles & Huberman 1994). An analysis of similar and contrasting cases of EAL students' writing experiences can elucidate the interpretation and understanding of a single-case finding (Yin 2003). The author argues that if a finding occurred in one similar case study but did not emerge in a contrasting case, it could be viewed as more robust. Besides, if the units of analysis, i.e. the five participants, were similar in many respects and the research yielded common conclusions from all cases, this would expand the generalisability of research findings (Yin 2003, p.53).

One important decision was to choose the right number of cases studies. Literature suggests researchers to select four or five case studies, as a larger number will not make possible to explore them intensively and to produce a detailed picture of this phenomenon (Creswell 2003; Gerring 2007). Initially, I planned to include six case studies to make sure that if anyone dropped out of the research, I would have had enough cases to continue with. However, I managed to gain five students' consent to participate in the main study. Further details about sampling will be presented in sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.3.

### *3.4.2 The Limitations of Case Study*

Although case study is one of the most widespread methods in social science methodology, it has been criticised for lack of objectivity and its unrepresentative nature (Yin 2003; Widmer *el al.* 2008). Yin (2003, p.10) argues that case studies are still viewed as a less worthwhile method on the grounds of a "lack of rigour", "little basis for scientific generalisation", time-consuming and resulting "in massive, unreadable documents".

One of the greatest concerns seems to be the lack of rigour. Yin (2003) explains that this criticism emerged from the methods and instrumentation case study researchers adopt. Yin argues that they often fail to employ systematic procedures that may result in ambiguous evidence or biased views that in turn influence the validity and reliability of the research conclusions. It is important that case studies researchers aim at overcoming any bias of their strategies and at producing relevant evidence (Yin 2003). To overcome these challenges, researchers should engage in critical self-scrutiny or active reflexivity that requires them to constantly document their actions in the implementation of their studies and to subject these processes to the critical scrutiny (Mason 2002). From this perspective, I constantly reported to my supervisors and other doctoral researchers who helped me with research scrutiny and provided feedback on designing a valid and reliable study.

The second concern about case studies is that they provide little basis for scientific generalisation. However, Widmer *et al.* (2008, p.152) argue that case study researchers should not be driven by the necessity of generalising their findings to other populations,

but should insist that "the worth of a research contribution is context-bound and not transferable to other entities". Further, Yin (2003) ascertains that case studies can be generalised to theoretical propositions, not to populations. In doing a case study the goal is to expand and generalise theories (analytic generalisation) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalisation). Alternatively, Bassey (1999, p.57) introduced the concept of 'fuzzy generalisations' – "that represent a kind of prediction arising from empirical enquiry without any measure of its probability". The fuzzy generalisations accompanied with case study reports constitute "a valuable way of bringing the educational research findings into professional discourse which in turn can influence the practice of teaching and the formation of educational policy" (Bassey 1999, p.57). Therefore, this study does not aim to generalise the research findings to other populations, but aims to disclose participants' views on the researched phenomenon, which eventually may influence the practice of teaching of academic writing at WIE.

Finally, case studies research is often criticised by scholars who contend that case studies take too long and result in massive documents (Yin 2003, p.10-11). To overcome these challenges, I planned the stages and the timelines for conducting this project. Essentially, I tried to transcribe most interviews and to analyse some data while its collection was still in process. For instance, I analysed the data regarding students' prior experiences and I wrote a report on the generation of the research categories. Accordingly, these actions attempted to address the massive amount of documents and to adjust the design to meet the emerging challenges.

### *3.4.3 Longitudinal Case Study*

It has been suggested that case study frequently embodies a longitudinal element (Bryman 2008). Likewise, these multiple-case studies investigated a longitudinal phenomenon that included a diachronic perspective to exploring the cases during the academic year (Widmer *et al.* 2008). According to the Inventory of Longitudinal Studies in the Social Sciences, to label a case study as a longitudinal project, it is necessary to establish the criterion of a span of at least one year for social studies and a span of at least nine months for educational projects (Saldaña 2003, p.3). This study spanned over twelve months (from October 2007 till October 2008).

This project draws on the following dimensions of a longitudinal study advanced by Saldaña (2003, p.5):

- Considering how time interacts with the collection and analysis of qualitative data.

- Identifying changes that occurred in EAL students' views on academic writing and in their beliefs as academic writers.

- Detecting the influences on EAL students' views.

As Saldaña (2003) suggests, longitudinal research focuses on how participants think, feel and act across time and aims to capture their perceptions. Thus, longitudinal research collects data on "how human actions and participant perspectives might change during the course of the study to reveal temporal-based themes and patterns of human development" (Saldaña 2003, p.4). It not only explains the nature of changes at

individual level but also enables researchers to recognise that individual behaviour is characterised by strong temporal tendencies (Ruspini 2002).

Changes were defined as observable differences in EAL participants' beliefs as academic writers and in their writing behaviours at successive time points. The stability or change within these perceptions was judged at the beginning, middle and at the end of the academic year. These time points were set up according to the deadlines of module assignments. Accordingly,

- The time point *beginning of the academic year* spanned from the beginning of the course to the deadlines for the first two assignments, i.e. October 2007 – first half of January 2008.

- *The middle of the academic year* point encompassed the deadlines for the other modules that stretched from second half of January to May 2008.

- *The end of year time* point included the time period from June till the beginning of September 2008.

The cut-off point for the main research was the deadline for dissertation submission. To examine students' perceptions of feedback on their dissertation would have required additional resources in terms of time, money and alternative data collection instruments, as participants left the country or moved to remote places.

To gauge these changes, it was important to establish a baseline of participants' perceptions and prior writing experiences. Therefore, a self-completion questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the course, October 2007. In addition, during the

first wave of interviews the research participants were asked to recall their prior writing

experiences and to expand on some questionnaire items to get a comprehensive picture

of each individual.

## 3.5 Validity and Reliability

A requisite of valid and reliable research is to consider the tactics of validity and

reliability. Validity means whether the case study "really" described what happened

during the period of study and observation, i.e. the degree to which the "findings capture

the reality of the situation under investigation" (Hitchcock & Hughes 1995, p.324),

while reliability is an assessment of consistency that entails that what was measured at

some point should yield the same results if conducted at a later point (Gray 2004, p.207-

8).

Yin (1994, 2003) has made a great contribution to theorising case study and to providing

procedures to enhance its validity and reliability. He proposed construct validity, internal

validity and external validity as the major concepts to consider when conducting a case

study.

### *3.5.1 Construct Validity*

Construct validity involves showing that the constructs used measured the variables that

were intended for investigation through multiple data collection instruments (Yin 2003,

p.34). It was important to seek agreement on the operationalised forms of construct,

detailing what they mean (Cohen *et al.* 2007). When reviewing the relevant literature, I

observed what other researchers meant by the constructs of academic writing and self-efficacy beliefs and whether they were similar to my research constructs.

### 3.5.2 Internal Validity and Reliability

Internal validity refers to whether the relationships established between variables are true or due to something else (Robson 1993). Internal validity is interconnected closely to reliability. If the researcher demonstrated internal validity, this would amount to "a simultaneous demonstration of reliability" (Hitchcock & Hughes 1995, p.324). The goal of reliability is to minimise biases and errors, so that another researcher conducting the same case study could arrive at the same findings and conclusions (Yin 2003, p.36). Unlike a laboratory experiment where the variables can be isolated and controlled, it is very difficult to replicate the case study research (Yin 2003; Cohen *et al.* 2007). The current work concentrated on investigating a phenomenon that is socially situated in a setting where every participant brought particular beliefs, experiences and perceptions. It would be hazardous to believe that the research findings could be replicated with other participants and contexts.

### 3.5.3 External Validity

Finally, external validity describes how findings could be generalised to fit a broader body of theory (Yin 2003, p.35-6), a wider population, cases or situations (Cohen *el al.* 2007). Reflections on the issue of generalisation were presented in section 3.4.2.

### 3.5.4 Tactics of Validity and Reliability

Based on Bassey (1999) and Creswell (2003, 2007), a number of potential measures were adopted to enhance the validity and reliability of this study:

- Prolonged engagement with the research participants. I spent as much time as possible on each case to reach insider knowledge and a better understanding of changes in participants' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers. I had casual conversations with participants before and after the interviews. We engaged in email exchanges of both academic and non-academic issues. In addition, I contacted the participants at later points to find out about missing data and to learn about their immediate events after they finished their Masters programme.

- Taking the report on the data that emerged from the questionnaires back to the respondents to check whether they had any comments or questions on it. The report was sent to the participants who indicated in the questionnaire that they wanted to receive it. However, I have not received any further questions or comments about the report. The only exception was the research participants who indicated that they had found it useful to have it as an example of a report on quantitative results.

- Taking a transcript to participants to check whether they thought that the interview transcripts displayed correctly what they wanted to express.

- Deploying triangulation using multiple sources of data, which preferably have different threats to their validity to reduce the chances of reaching false

conclusions (Hammersley 2008). "Similar patterns of findings from very different methods of gathering data increase confidence in their validity" (Robson 1993, p.69).

- Debriefing doctoral students and supervisors on the design and data collection process to get feedback about the appropriateness of the methods.

- External audits. I shared several interview transcripts and the lists of categories with my supervisors and several research students who provided feedback on the themes and categories that I had established. Details on these audits will be presented in section 4.5.5.

- Employment of a good-quality tape-recorder.

## 3.6 Ethical Issues and Consent

Central to designing the current research was the issues surrounding data usage, data protection and other ethical practices that I had to consider before embarking on it. There has been a growth in concern over the ethical responsibilities for participants' rights and the potentially adverse affect on them (Rapley 2007). Rapley (2007, p.24) states that research "should not cause any harm or distress, either psychological or physical, to anyone taking part in it" both to when the researchers and participants spend time in the field and when researchers write up the reports. Instead, Gray (2004) wrote that interviewees should know after a good interview more about themselves and their situation than they did before. Essentially, three participants reported benefiting from the interviews, as they prompted them to consider the writing processes more carefully (e.g. see section 6.9).

This study relies heavily on Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004) published by BERA. These guidelines direct researchers to gauge different aspects of conducting educational research and to reach ethically acceptable positions in which their actions are justifiable and sound. Accordingly, I had to take a series of steps to conform to the researchers' responsibilities. Firstly, I sought agreement from the department and the course leaders of Taught Masters courses to conduct this project. I also sought consent from all the students who completed the questionnaires. I devised a voluntary informed consent form for participants to sign before they engaged in the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 3.1). The consent form addressed the following ethical matters:

- The purposes of the research and of the final report.

- Their rights to participate voluntarily and the right to withdraw at any time.

- The participant requirements, such as commitment to interviews, to be voice-recorded, sharing drafts, final versions and tutors' feedback sheets.

All the materials collected from students were held in strict confidence. Another ethical procedure included protecting the anonymity of participants by employing pseudonyms for students (see Table 4.1), tutors and for module assignments. For tutors, I used the label *Respondent* followed by a number from 1 to 5. The names of Module assignments were labelled using the participants' initial, followed by the capital letter A, which stands for assignment and the number of assignment. For instance, to refer to the assignment two completed by Oliver, I used the label name *OA 2*.

Essentially, literature views consent as a continuous process in which "participants should be continuously consulted throughout all phases of the longitudinal research"

(Saldaña 2003, p.24). Thus, after the first wave of interviews, I decided to provide students with remuneration as an incentive to keep them interested in further participation. Consequently, I had to revise the consent form and had each participant to sign it. The major changes regarded the clause about the payment and the participant commitments to the project. Accordingly, participants were expected to commit a certain amount of their time to attend all the interviews and to share their drafts, final versions and feedback sheets with me (see Appendix 3.2).

## 3.7 The Boundaries of the Research

The delineation of the research boundaries helped me to identify the scope of the researched phenomenon. The conceptual boundary that demarcates the area of study "separates what is directly relevant for a particular purpose from what is not of direct relevance or interest" (Blackmore & Ison 1998, p.41). However, the boundaries of an exploratory case study are often difficult to define as the researcher aims to capture the holistic picture of the phenomenon and to display the interrelations of variables (Yin 2003).

The physical and social boundaries of my research were primarily confined to students who spoke English as an additional language. However, the self-completion questionnaires were administered to all Masters students at WIE, including NES students. These students were involved in literacy practices within their department and outside it. WIE provided a range of literacy practices such as tutorials, academic writing class, guidelines and assessment criteria to support student writing. In terms of outside the department practices, I explored participants' opinions on CELTE. Additionally, I

addressed participants' networking with peers and friends that helped them to make sense of writing conventions. The main social boundaries were therefore defined by EAL students.

The conceptual boundary defining the area of my research was determined by my interest in academic writing, the ACLITS approach, feedback, self-efficacy beliefs and literacy practices. The final written report included the voices of participants, a complex description of the problems and my reflections.

## 3.8 Summary

To sum up, the constructivist and interpretivist paradigms underpinned the current research design. They also informed the follow-up decisions about methodology and data collection methods. The paradigm most naturally suited to the research was a longitudinal multiple-case study. The rationale for conducting a case study lies with its potential for retaining the holistic and meaningful characteristics of EAL students' writing experiences. The next chapter will present the data collection and data analysis instruments.

# Chapter 4 – Research Design

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the profiles of research participants. It details the methods used to trial the research, collect and analyse the data.

## 4.2 Research Participants

All research participants were from WIE: EAL students, NES students and five tutors.

*NES Students*

The research questionnaires (see Appendix 4.1) were conducted with students taking Taught Masters courses during the academic years 2007/08 and 2008/09. Sixty-seven EAL students and fifty-three NES students completed the self-completion questionnaires. The body of NES students was diverse incorporating part-time, full-time students and mature students.

*EAL Students*

The research interviews were conducted with five EAL students taking Taught Masters courses during the academic year 2007/08. To access the potential case study participants, the questionnaire administered in October 2007 asked respondents to

indicate whether they were willing to participate in the main study. Out of sixty-six students who completed the questionnaire, eighteen volunteered to be interviewed further. At that stage, I applied purposive sampling to recruit a small number of students for whom English was an additional language and who displayed contrasting views and experiences of the investigated phenomenon.

Out of eighteen volunteers, I selected seven participants based on the abovementioned sampling criteria to further negotiate their participation. I emailed these students providing them with more details about the nature of the study. After several email exchanges, I managed to get five students' consent. One of the participants, however, dropped out of the study soon after agreeing to take part in, as he had to return to his home country indefinitely. To get one or two more cases, I consulted the prospective participants and was given a contact (snowball sampling). This study consisted of five participants. Their demographic and educational information are included in Table 4.1.

As Table 4.1 shows, three out of five case study participants were from East Asia and one out of five was a male student. Consequently, there was a gender and ethnic imbalance amongst participants. However, the sample shared commonalities with the student population taking Taught Masters courses. Data analysis indicated that the questionnaire sample consisted of nearly three quarters of female students and only over one quarter of male students. Additionally, there was a considerable number of students from East Asia. I would have preferred to have a more diverse sample because it would have expanded the generalisability of the research findings (Yin 2003). Next, I will

| Name | Age Range | Sex | Regions and Countries of residence | Subject of 1st Degree | Other higher education degrees | Taught Masters course at WIE | Passed/failed assignments |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Mary** | 20 – 29 | Female | Eastern Europe* | Psychology | Completed 1 year of 2-year Masters Course in Psychology | MA Educational Studies | All passed |
| **Oliver** | 30 – 39 | Male | Nigeria Africa | Animal Sciences | Masters in Educational Studies PGDE | MA Educational Studies | All passed |
| **Hannah** | 20 – 29 | Female | China East Asia | Chinese Language and Literature | none | MA Educational Studies | One failed |
| **Rita** | 30 – 39 | Female | China East Asia | Law | none | MA Educational Studies | One failed |
| **Molly** | 20 – 29 | Female | Hong Kong East Asia | English Language and Literature | none | MA Drama and Theatre Education | All passed |

*To guarantee participants' anonymity, I have not included Mary's home county as it may disclose her identity.

**Table 4.1 Background Information of the Case Study Participants**

introduce a brief profile for each participant, except the profile of the case study that I will present in detail in Chapter 6.

*Profiles of Case Study Participants*

Oliver was a mature male student whose first degree was in Animal Sciences. He continued his studies, embarking on the Masters in Educational Studies and later on a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) to qualify for teaching in his home country. He studied all his previous degrees in English and did not need to take a language test to be admitted at WIE. In his first degree, Oliver was graded C in an English examination that included speaking and writing. He also had some teaching experience.

Hannah was a young female student who did her first degree in Chinese Language and Literature. She studied English at school as part of the curriculum. She did not want to disclose the results of IELTS, as she believed that they were very low. Hannah attended the pre-sessional courses before embarking on the Masters programme at WIE. She had some experience in teaching Chinese to foreigners.

Rita was a mature female student who studied Law. She studied English at school as part of the curriculum. Her IELTS results were 6.5 for reading, listening and writing and 6.0 for speaking. After graduation, Rita taught Law at a college in her home country. Similar to Hannah, she attended the pre-sessional courses and they were allocated in the same studying group.

Molly was a young female student who had a degree in English Language and Literature. She taught English at secondary school. Similar to Oliver, Molly had extended experience of studying English, so she was not required to take language tests.

According to my personal evaluation, Oliver and Molly were the most proficient English speakers, while Hannah was the least proficient. She encountered difficulties in expressing her thoughts fluently. Mary and Rita were quite fluent. However, they had occasionally to reorganise their utterances to make them clear to listener. All five students did all their previous educational degrees in universities in their home countries.

***Tutors***

Interviews were conducted with five tutors who taught modules as part of the Taught Masters courses at WIE.

## 4.3 Sources of data

The major sources of data I collected were from:

- Self-completion questionnaires;
- Semi-structured interviews with students and tutors;
- Tutors' feedback sheets;
- Students' notes and written work.

More details on each data collection instrument is presented bellow, but first a brief outline of the study timescale is provided to illustrate the stages and major events that occurred during data collection.

**Table 4.2 Outline of the research timescale**

| | |
|---|---|
| June 2007 – September 2007 | ▪ Piloting the questionnaire with 10 Masters students taking a Taught Masters course at WIE in the academic year 2006/07. All 10 participants were EAL students.<br>▪ Piloting the interview schedules with an EAL student from the same pool of participants as well as with a research student from WIE. |
| September 2007 | Contact course leaders to gain consent to administer the questionnaire |
| October 2007 | Administer questionnaire during taught sessions to maximise the response rate. |
| October 2007 | Identifying case study students. |
| November 2007 | Analysing questionnaire data. Writing up a report. |
| November 2007 – September 2008 | Conducting the interviews with the research participants and tutors. |
| November 2007 – September 2008 | Transcribing, coding, and analysing the interviews. |
| September 2008 | Contact course leaders to gain consent to administer the questionnaire with Masters students in the academic year 2008/09 to maximise the rate of response. |
| October 2008 | Administer the questionnaire with Masters students. |
| November 2008 – onwards | Data analysis and writing up the drafts of thesis. |
| April 2009 | Conducting the last interview with the research participant who required over half-year extension to complete the writing tasks. |
| August, 2010 | The completion of the thesis. |

### 4.3.1 The Use of Questionnaire as a Research Tool

The self-completion questionnaires were administered in October 2007 and October 2008. Its main purpose was to gain insights into Masters students' prior writing experiences and their perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers. Another crucial purpose was to identify points of contrast and similarity between NES and EAL students.

The logic of choosing a questionnaire is grounded in a number of reasons. Firstly, the literature on research methods suggests that questionnaires tend to be more reliable than interviews because they are anonymous and encourage respondents to answer honestly (Cohen *et al.* 2000). Secondly, they are more economical than interviews in terms of time and money spent on them. Thirdly, Drever (1995) acknowledged that questionnaires help researchers to gain a broad picture of the phenomenon under study. From these perspectives, the questionnaires provided a holistic picture of Masters students' views about academic writing and their self-efficacy beliefs as writers. In addition, it served as a feasible means of selecting the case studies to be examined in-depth at a later stage (Bryman 2008). Importantly, the questionnaires served as a way of validating interviews evidence on students' prior writing experiences, their perceptions of themselves as writers and their views on feedback.

### 4.3.2 Limitations of Questionnaire

Questionnaires have certain drawbacks that might undermine the validity and reliability of research findings. Firstly, respondents may misunderstand certain items. As Cohen *et al.* (2000) argue, the same questions and instructions may have different meanings for different people. For instance, twenty-one students did not follow the instructions for question 5. Respondents were asked to place a list of seven features of academic writing in order of importance with 1 as the most important to 7 as least important. These students either selected all the features as being very important or used a three-point scale instead of a seven-point scale.

Another problem is that respondents tend to fill in the questionnaires hurriedly, sometimes missing items or misunderstanding the instructions (Cohen *et al.* 2000; Gray 2004). In this study, some tutors allocated little time for the completion of questionnaires, which could have prompted students to hasten and be less alert to the questionnaire items. For instance, a few participants had missed some items in questions 6 and 8, where they were asked to indicate their views on large lists of statements.

A further drawback is that response rates tend to be low. Many types of questionnaires receive response rates below 50 per cent (Muijs 2004, p.42). For instance, Kerlinger (1986 cited in Gray 2004) warns that a response rate of 40 to 50 per cent for postal questionnaires is very common. To maximise the response rate, I administered the questionnaire at the end of regular classes to the present students. In October 2007, I distributed the questionnaire at the end of three different classes. One class was attended by full-time students taking various Masters courses, except the Master Degree in Drama and Theatre Education. Another class was attended by part-time students taking various Masters courses, except the Master Degree in Drama and Theatre Education. In this case, the module tutor preferred to distribute the questionnaire in one class and collect them at the next one. A lower response rate was registered comparing to those that were completed and collected during class time. Finally, the third module was attended by present students taking only a Masters course in Drama and Theatre Education.

In October 2008, I administered the questionnaire during two modules. One attended by both full-time and part-time students taking various Masters courses, except the Masters

in Drama and Theatre Education. The other module was attended by students taking Drama and Theatre Education courses.

### *4.3.3 Piloting Questionnaire*

A crucial stage in devising a questionnaire is piloting, which aims primarily to increase its reliability, validity and practicability (Cohen *et al*. 2007). The initial drafts of the questionnaire were short and vague, including mostly open-ended questions. Through multiple redrafting and discussions with the supervisors, however, a more specific and appropriately sized questionnaire was created.

The piloting of the questionnaire was undertaken with a sample of ten students from WIE taking Taught Master courses in 2006/07. Essentially, I sought feedback emphasising that participants could stop at any time to clarify confusing points. After the respondents filled in the questionnaires, I enquired about the clarity of questions and instructions, as well as their general attitude to its layout and attractiveness. I also asked them to explain how they had understood the items to ensure that their interpretations corresponded to mine.

The piloting also helped to eliminate some terms that raised confusion with the students. For instance, *native language* was changed to *mother language*; *peer* to *student*; *reader* to *marker*. The sequencing of the questions was amended to make a smoother transition from easier questions to more complicated ones. For instance, question 8 includes a large table with ten categories and definitions for nine of them, demanding extra attention and time to be understood. Consequently, it was moved from position 6 to its

current position 8, allowing respondents to answer questions 6 and 7 that include fewer categories. As a result of piloting, I defined the frequency categories *frequently* and *sometimes* in questions 2 and 4 to increase clarity about their meaning. I reformulated the wording of questions 2, 4 and 8 to eliminate difficulties in their understanding. Further analysis revealed that the questionnaire contained a double-barrelled item in question 6 'I am aware of marker expectations and of assessment criteria', which was subsequently split into 'I am aware of marker expectations' and 'I am aware of assessment criteria'. I also removed the category '*Other*' in questions 2 and 4, as I had noticed that none of the students had provided a response to these categories.

Following piloting and discussing it with my supervisors, I introduced some amendments to questions 3 and 9. Initially, the ranking scale of both questions did not include a clear-cut mid-point for a neutral response. The literature reveals five-, six- and seven-point scales, where the seven-point scale is considered to allow a finer grade of judgement than the other ranking scales (Osgood *et al.* 1957). Consequently, I opted for the seven-point scale. However, during trialling students had found it difficult to identify the most appropriate point on such a large scale. Students expressed their preferences for a five-point scale, as it was easier to manage. It also retained enough gradation to give meaningful data. As a result, I chose the five-point scale. Additionally, it was decided to apply the semantic differential technique to question 3 and 9 to determine students' attitudes to their previous writing experiences. The respondents had to express their attitudes by ticking the most appropriate answer on a five-point scale between each pair of two opposite adjectives such as *useful – useless* and *easy – difficult*.

The administration of the questionnaires revealed that it would have been useful if I had piloted it during a regular class and with a more diverse group of respondents, including NES students. It emerged that under time pressure students misunderstood some questionnaire instructions and items. The piloting took place in a quiet and unrushed environment where the respondents took as much time as they needed to make sense of and to complete it. Nevertheless, I could not administer the questionnaires in a regular class because at the moment of trialling, the Taught Masters students had already finished all modules. Summing up, the piloting and the discussions with the supervisors helped considerably to eliminate the ambiguities and weaknesses of the questionnaire and to improve its overall quality.

### 4.3.4 Participants and Procedures

In total, one hundred and thirty students completed the questionnaires. Participation was voluntary and data collection was anonymous. Ten questionnaires were excluded as the respondents were reading for a Mhil/PhD course, which did not fall in the profile of the research sample. Thus, one hundred and twenty returned questionnaires were analysed.

The sample consisted of over one quarter of male students and nearly three quarters of female students. Less than half of the participants reported that they were English-native speakers, whereas over half of them spoke English as an additional language. More than half of the students fell in the age category from 20-29; while over one quarter reported that they were aged 30-39 years-old and just a very small number of students indicated that they were aged either 40-49 or 50-59 years-old. The exact number of demographic information of questionnaire participants are summarised in Table 4.3.

**Table 4.3 Background information of questionnaire participants**

| Language status | Sex | Age category |
|---|---|---|
| 53 NES students<br>67 EAL students | 86  female students<br>34 male students | 20-29 – 73 students<br>30-39 – 33 students<br>40-49 – 11 students<br>50-59 – 3 students |

Overall, the population was quite diverse, including students who had graduated freshly from a bachelor degree, students who had had some teaching and/or research experience, international students and mature students.

### 4.3.5 Instrumentation

The questionnaire on "Students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers and of the academic writing process" was divided into three sections:

*Section A.* Background information;

*Section B.* Your experience of academic writing;

*Section C.* Your perceptions of writing.

The questionnaire included 56 items (see Appendix 4.1). The majority of questions were closed with predefined categories that students had to tick. On one occasion, they were required to supply their own response. The four items from the section 'Background information' provided key information about respondents: their gender, age category, status of English language and the course they were registered for.

The logic of choosing the closed questions is grounded in several advantages. Firstly, they are easy to complete as respondents are likely to be discouraged by writing extensively (Bryman 2008). Secondly, it is easy to process answers as the appropriate

code can be derived from the selected answer (Bryman 2008). Finally, closed questions can enhance the comparability of answers and can lead to statistical analysis of responses (Cohen *et al.* 2007). Nevertheless, these questions can constrain the spontaneity in answers (Bryman 2008), as the categories might not be exhaustive (Cohen *et al.* 2007).

The questionnaire comprised different types of closed questions such as dichotomous questions, rating scale questions and multiple choice questions. Rating scales included semantic differential and Likert scales questions. Semantic differential items asked for a response to a five-point scale that included a range between different pairs of adjectives: *very useful* to *not at all useful* and *very easy* to *very difficult*. Likert scale items asked for a response to a five-point scale that ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. One open item asked respondents to indicate any writing strategies that may contribute to the quality of writing. This open-question did not provide much information as only two students offered some extra thoughts. Indeed, respondents tended to prefer questions that required much less time to complete.

### *4.3.6 Data Analysis of Questionnaire*

This section explores how data from self-completion questionnaires were analysed. Firstly though, it introduces an overview of data collection tools and data analysis instruments to illustrate how research data were analysed (see Figure 4.1).

**Data collection tools**          **Data analysis**

Students'
Questionnaire

**Quantitative
analysis**

Descriptive statistics
Correlational statistics

Tutors' Written
Feedback

**Quantitative content
analysis**

Descriptive statistics

**Findings**

Presented in Chapters
5-10.

Student interviews
Tutor interviews
Student notes

**Qualitative content
analysis**

Categorical strategies
Contextualising
strategies

**Figure 4.1 Overview of data analysis (Santos 2007).**

Questionnaires were analysed by employing SPSS software. Descriptive and

correlational statistical analyses were applied. Descriptive techniques intend to

summarise numeric data in tables, graphs or representations of scores/percentage

(Teddlie & Tashakkuri 2009). The major goal of descriptive statistics is to support

researchers in understanding the data, detecting patterns and better communicating the

results (Teddlie & Tashakkuri 2009). Correlational techniques generally examine the

relationship between two variables, which do not necessarily indicate causal

relationships but indicate the measures of association (Cohen *et al.* 2007). Essentially,

data was analysed according to student status of English language and gender.

## 4.4 The Use of Interviews as a Research Tool

### 4.4.1 Advantages of Interviews

The next phase of this research entailed conducting interviews with the case study participants to elicit their perceptions and writing experiences. It has been claimed that interviews are among the most widely used methods in the social sciences (Baker 2004). According to one estimate, interviews are used in 90 percent of social scientific research (Briggs 1986), prevailing considerably in case study projects (Yin 2003).

The logic of using the interviews as the central data collection technique is based on their exploratory potential for eliciting rich data on participants' "views, attitudes and the meanings that underpin their lives and behaviours" (Gray 2004, p.213). Kvale (2007, p.7) affirms that the "interview is a construction site for knowledge", which enables interviewers to explore interviewees' interpretations of the world in which they live (Cohen *et al.* 2000). Therefore, interviews represent dialogues where EAL students' "meanings are not only conveyed, but cooperatively built up, received, interpreted and recorded by the interviewer" (Holstein & Gubrium 1995, p.118). Thus, "knowledge produced in a research interview is constituted by the interaction itself" (Kvale 2007, p.14). Such data gives an authentic insight into interviewees' experiences and perceptions (Silverman 2000, 2001). Based on these assertions, the optimal setting in an interview is when researchers, participants and research objectives engage in a dynamic interaction to build new meaning (Johnson & Weller 2001).

Furthermore, a semi-structured interview format was adopted to keep the interview focused and responsive. Mason (2002) suggests that a semi-structured approach entails a fluid and flexible structure with no rigidly sequenced script of questions, allowing researcher and interviewees to develop meanings unexpectedly and to cover significant issues of the research enquiry. Drever (1995, p.1) asserted that the "interviewer sets up a general structure by deciding in advance what ground is to be covered and what main questions are to be asked". Essentially, Robson (2002, p.231) argues that a semi-structured interview "offers to the researcher the flexibility to modify the wording and the order of questions, based upon his/her perception of what seems most appropriate in the context of the conversation". Semi-structured interviews enabled me to adapt the interview schedule to fit each participant and particular context. Further details on the interview schedules and interviews will be presented in sections 4.4.5 and 4.4.7.

### 4.4.2 Limitations of Interviews

Interviews have particular drawbacks that might undermine the validity and reliability of research findings. Yin (2003) warns that interviews are subject to common problems of poor recall, bias and poor or inaccurate articulation. Literature points out that interviewees are prone to overlook events and processes that could be important "in terms of the context of the research, but even when pressed will not or cannot provide detailed specificities" (Gardner 2001, p.192). Participants might therefore be selective, glossing over parts of their behaviours and perceptions (Miles & Huberman 1994). Gardner (2001) believes that this might happen because participants may be entirely unaware of particular social processes that are highly important to their experiences.

Alternatively, participants might be aware of these processes, but take them for granted and think that it is insignificant to communicate them (ibid. 2001).

Moreover, if the interviews are conducted in the L2 or foreign language, the problems are exacerbated by interviewees' and/or interviewer's limited language proficiency (Gass & Mackey 2000). Gass and Mackey note that interviewers deal frequently with participants "who are limited in their ability to express themselves in the target language and to understand the target language" (ibid. p.97). Consequently, they are confronted with the additional issues of interpreting what the interviewees said and of making assumptions whether they understood correctly what had been asked. Additionally, the limited proficiency of EAL interviewees may affect the content of the answers, therefore "they may verbalise what they can, rather than the full version of what they were thinking" (ibid. p.98). The interviews might have been compromised not only by interviewees' limited knowledge of English, but by my own poor language proficiency. Like the research participants, I was a student whose English is an additional language and this might have potentially impacted on how interviewees had understood and answered the questions. However, being an EAL speaker probably encouraged interviewees to be less concerned about the grammatical accuracy of their utterances and to focus on generating honest and detailed responses.

In this project, participants occasionally struggled to recall accurately the events or they could not utter appropriately their thoughts. For instance, two of the participants tended to provide simplistic description of the writing stages they had undertaken to complete their assignments, yielding poor details. When asked for more specifics they would

repeat the answers without expanding on them much. In one case, the student had a poor command of English and an inability to explain what she intended to say. As a result, she might have chosen not to mention some writing experiences because she could not explain them precisely. In the other case, I believe that the student was probably either unaware of some writing processes he had undergone or did not consider them important to mention. The other three participants tended to give ample descriptions of their writing experiences and challenges they had encountered.

Despite these potential deficiencies, it is essential that researchers adequately recognise the importance of participants' accounts as the "social processes are dependent on the practices and interpretations of concrete individuals, and therefore the accounts they give of themselves and others should heavily inform the researcher's account of those processes" (Gardner 2001, p.196). Importantly, these accounts "provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds" (Miller & Glassner 1997, p.100). Taken as a whole, the use of semi-structured interviews as a primary data collection instrument was well-justified. Interviews provided an important means for capturing students' writing experiences, the meanings they attributed to their literacy practices and the factors that they believed to have contributed to their writing development. Approaches to overcoming the potential shortcomings of interviews will be presented in section 4.4.4.

### 4.4.3 Interviewer Identity

Studies on qualitative methods (Miller & Glassner 1997; Abell *et al.* 2006) have raised the question about how interviewers' identity based on their age, gender, class, or race

may influence interviewees' responses. Interviews involve "meaning making work" by both interviewers and interviewees (Holstein & Gubrium 1995) who negotiate appropriate identities for themselves, share concerns about how to present one's self, one's knowledge and one's similarity or difference from the other (Abell *et al.* 2006). This might ultimately be central to what interviewees disclose as the "developing interaction serves to add to and elaborate on the categories and activities" (Baker 1997, p.139).

Qualitative researchers are divided on how much interviewers need to engage in interviews and how much they need to display of their experiences. On one hand, "traditional research interviewers are generally expected to keep their 'selves' out of the interview process" to ensure that they do not affect interviewees' responses (Holstein & Gubrium 1995, p.13). From this perspective, the interviewers' role is primarily to guide the talk through questions, silence and response tokens (e.g. nodding, 'uh' – 'huh' expressions) and to decide which particular part of the answer to follow-up according to the emerging cues from the dialogue (Rapley 2001). Next, interviewers' role is to clear up any ambiguities through paraphrasing when respondents cannot convey the meaning and through probing the accuracy of understanding the questions and answers (Drever 1995). Indeed, these techniques enabled me to provide students with opportunities to express their opinions and to raise topics that were relevant to their writing experiences.

On the other hand, interviewers are encouraged to employ tools such as self-disclosure to prompt interviewees to reveal their experiences and beliefs frankly (Abell *et al.* 2006). In this sense, I relied upon disclosing my experiences related to the topic to build rapport

with respondents and to "provoke elaborated interview talk" (ibid. p.241). However, the authors caution that interviewers have to check whether interviewees receive the appropriate message. Otherwise, through sharing experiences interviewers may reinforce differences between themselves and the interviewees in terms of age, gender, race, education and beliefs (ibid.). Consequently, I had to be careful to refrain from imposing my own perceptions and beliefs about the researched phenomenon, aiming to reveal only my writing experiences as a Masters student. I tried, therefore, to be impartial and not to prompt any desired responses.

Based on the interactional nature of interviews, it seems important that researchers share the same frame of reference with the participants and have the knowledge of insider (Cohen & Manion 1989; May 1997). This may enable them "to have the subjective knowledge necessary to truly understand their life experiences" and to make legitimate knowledge claims (Miller & Glassner 1997, p.232). From this perspective, I felt that my status as a doctoral student who had taken a Masters Degree in 2005/06 at WIE advantaged me as I was familiar with the writing practices, assessment criteria, modules, tutors and overall provision within the university and institute. Essentially, this situation enabled me to establish rapport with respondents, to encourage them to provide full and frank answers and to understand their writing experiences better.

Furthermore, it seems to me that the similarity in age and gender with the majority of participants might have encouraged them to answer openly and truthfully. Four participants out of five were female students who were several years younger or older than me, which did not create a large disparity among us based on age. There was only

114

one participant who differed in terms of gender and age. The participant was a male

student in his late thirties. Despite these differences, I had not noticed that my identity

influenced his responses. Similarly to other participants, he offered responses to all my

questions and was willing to raise his own concerns about the researched phenomenon.

Interviewees and I differed in terms of ethnic, linguistic and cultural background.

However, I have not sensed that these factors influenced the interviewing processes.

Overall, I believe that my insider knowledge about interviewees' writing experiences

and my interest in the topic probably had a positive impact on interviewing.

### *4.4.4 Interview Credibility*

A fundamental concern of interview design was the pursuit of credibility by ensuring

that the findings were reliable and valid (Gray 2004). A range of tactics were used to

strengthen their validity and reliability. Firstly, I tried to design the interview schedule to

meet the research objectives and questions (Drever 1995). Secondly, careful attention

was devoted to building up rapport and a comfortable atmosphere. According to Miller

and Glassner (1997, p.106), rapport building is key to interviewing, which entails

"establishing trust and familiarity, showing genuine interest, assuring confidentiality and

not being judgemental". This situation encourages respondents to answer truthfully and

to raise issues that were important to them (Mason 2002; Kvale 2007). Overall, my

judgement is that all the interviewees felt comfortable enough to talk and disclose their

writing experiences and perceptions of literacy practices. Furthermore, due to the nature

of their Masters programme, all participants were familiar with educational research

methods. Presumably, they were more cooperative and open to interview questions than

the students from other departments where training in interviewing is not provided. They

might have also been inquisitive, as they wanted to find how this method worked in

practice.

Additionally, I deployed other measures that aimed to enrich the interview reliability and

validity. One important step was to ensure that this study conformed to ethical

requirements (see section 3.6). Besides, to avoid the pitfalls of participants' unreliability,

it was essential to ensure that reality was reconstructed using various accounts and

multiple types of data to triangulate findings (Gardner 2001). Thus, I sought some

alternative data collection techniques such as tutors' interview accounts, feedback sheets

and questionnaires to substantiate the research findings. Essentially, this project

involved numerous encounters with each participant during the academic year, which

allowed me to identify and corroborate the truthfulness of particular accounts uttered at

different stages of interviewing. Sikes (2000, p.267) concludes that,

> "an approach which looks for themes across a number of interviews, respondent
> (informant) validation, research reflexivity, and triangulation of various kinds may
> provide methodological substance and support for the researchers' accounts in their
> research report".

There is a number of important decisions to be considered before starting recording

interviews. These include how much is recorded, what is recorded and what is

disregarded, what equipment to use to ensure a high quality of recordings and how much

is transcribed (Peräkylä 1997). Firstly, Peräkylä (1997) asserts that researchers have to

decide on what and how much they record. There is always a limit to how much data a

single researcher can transcribe and analyse. However, Yin (2003) indicates that rich

resources have definite advantages of yielding rich findings. Thus, I recorded all the conversations that I had with interviewees.

The technical quality of recordings is a fundamental issue as well. If something remains inaudible in the tapes, there is no way of recovering it (Peräkylä 1997). On two occasions, I had to struggle with the tape transcription, as the background noise was loud enough to interfere with the quality of recordings. These took me double the time to transcribe them than it took with the recordings where technical quality was excellent. All interviews were transcribed fully for content, following the list of transcribing conventions developed by Poland (2001, see Appendix 4.2). Poland (2001) advises that transcripts be accurate accounts of interviews without being edited or tidied up to make them sound better. The transcripts included pauses, response tokens (words like okay, yeah, hmm and so on), interruptions, laughing or other respondents' actions that transmitted various interactional features of the encounters. However, some parts of interviews that included my introductions to the nature and purposes of the interviews and the parts that incorporated off-topic comments were not included in the transcripts.

To enhance the credibility of interviews, I submitted an interview to my supervisors so they could give me feedback on the balance of talk between interviewee and interviewer and the questions, probes and prompts I used. The supervisors acknowledged that the interviewee did most of the talking and the right questions, probes and prompts were used to explore in-depth the respondents' responses.

## *4.4.5 The Interview Schedule*

At the preliminary stage, I constructed the questions of the interview schedules based on the relevant literature and research questions. The main purpose of the interview schedule was to assist me in obtaining relevant information from participants. Drever (1995, p.18) suggested that the interview schedule can serve:

- to guide the interview,

- to remind the interviewee of the formal nature of the discussion,

- and, essentially to generate important evidence for the study.

I designed four interview schedules: one schedule explored EAL students' prior writing experiences (see Appendix 4.3); the second focused on the process of writing assignments (see Appendix 4.4); the third explored retrospectively students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers at the end of their course (see Appendix 4.5); and, the last interview schedule was planned for interviewing tutors (see Appendix 4.6). The research interviews consisted almost entirely of open-ended questions, which enabled me to investigate the respondents' views on the topics under study, establish rapport and assess what they believed about writing.

As suggested by Robson (2002), my interview schedules were organised into several sections starting with introductory remarks. This focused on establishing rapport with the interviewees and introducing the major interview topics. They continued with a list of topic headings, questions, probes and prompts. Drever (1995) ascertained that prompts encourage people to talk and recall important events; whereas probes ask

interviewees to clarify and explain what they have said. They ended with closing comments that asked interviewees for any questions or details they wanted to raise and some expressions of thanks.

I tried to follow the interview schedules. Nevertheless, I often had to pick up participants' clues, explore their responses and give space for their thoughts. Essentially, I tried to be flexible, consider the dynamics of our interactions and not to follow closely the order of the interview schedule. Interviewees tended sometimes to provide answers to more than one question simultaneously or they themselves initiated discussion of certain issues that I initially planned for later stages in interviewing. Importantly, interviewees raised issues that I had overlooked. My main focus was, therefore, to interact, listen actively, ask questions, gain access to interviewees' accounts and decide on the next stages with reference to the clues emerging in the interviews.

The semi-structured interviews provided therefore interviewees with freedom to talk about topics they thought were relevant to them and to cast light on numerous issues that I had not planned. This approach engendered major shifts in the research focus and design as the study evolved. From the outset, I assumed that EAL students would face difficulties mainly with starting to write an assignment, organising the information, revising, anticipating the audience, writing grammatically accurate and managing the amount of work. As a result, interview schedules initially reflected those areas, comprising many questions about planning, composing, revising processes and writing practices. Luckily, the use of open questions and the follow-up of students' leads rather

than adhering rigidly to my interview schedule enabled me to learn what participants had to tell me.

Over the course of interviewing, students did not focus on problems with planning, composing or revising stages. Even if they had experienced difficulties at these stages, they were more likely to opt for alternative approaches to solving them. For instance, three students employed extensively L1 to search for materials, retrieve content and paraphrase the original sources into L2. Nevertheless, findings suggested that the use of L1 was not always efficient. Two students indicated that they had often misrepresented the key points of the materials when translating them into L2. Towards the middle of the year, they revealed using L1 less often. Additionally, three students reported to have hardly revised their written work before submission, or even if they did, they had focused primarily on identifying grammatical errors. Yet, they did not consider their revising approach as a problem and did not initiate a conversation about it.

Instead, students revealed that they had encountered difficulties in learning tutors' expectations, assessment criteria and writing conventions. They also reported finding it difficult to make sense of tutor feedback and to express their personal opinions. The preliminary data analysis indicated that there were important gaps between students' and tutors' understandings of the task requirements, of certain writing concepts and of the dominant values, providing evidence of confusion at the level of meaning-making rather than at the level of technical and cognitive skills. The focus of data analysis and conceptual framework, therefore, moved from an asocial aspect of writing (i.e. cognitive, linguistic) to the socially situated aspect of writing.

This shift led to some fundamental changes in the research design to accommodate the emerging data. Firstly, it required a reconceptualisation of the theoretical framework, which shifted its emphasis from cognitive theories of writing to sociocultural theories of learning. These theories regarded writing as situated in a concrete context characterised by social interactions between writer and reader, which are mediated by shared practices, tools and semiotic means (Prior 2006). Secondly, the shift produced some changes in the research data collection instruments. I focused less on investigating revision processes and using stimulated recall to analyse students' revision changes. Finally, a new analytical framework was elaborated to analyse the emerging data. Based on sociocultural theories that emphasised the socially situated nature of writing (see section 2.2.1-2.2.3) and on Casanave's (1995) study (see section 2.6.3), I drew three main themes to analyse the research data: *interactions with members of the discourse community* (tutors, peers and teacher-assistants), with *the training system* (taught modules, writing assignments, academic writing class, CELTE support) and *with institutional artefacts (*samples of previously written work, published guidelines and assessment criteria). Hence, once I gained a better understanding of what was happening within the research I tried to refocus it to accommodate the emerging data and evolving findings.

### *4.4.6 Piloting the Interview*

In June – July 2007, I piloted the interviewing techniques with a PhD student and a Masters student taking a Taught Masters course at WIE. The purpose of the pilot study was primarily to explore under realistic conditions the feasibility of interviewing method

of collecting and analysing data and of testing interview questions. Indeed, piloting gave me insights into how clear the questions were formulated and what kind of responses they might generate. This agrees with Gilliam's (2000, p.22) argument that the piloting purpose is concerned mainly with "getting the questions right rather than getting the interview right". It also provided feedback which helped me to revise the interview schedule and to develop the required interviewing skills. Additionally, I transcribed an excerpt from an interview and tried to discern the major themes, gaining some insights into how to manage and interpret data. Taken as a whole, the piloting familiarised me with strategies of inquiry that I used later during the main research.

### 4.4.7 Research Interviews with EAL Students

The interviews were conducted mainly throughout the academic year 2007/2008. However, I conducted the final interview with Hannah in April 2009, as she required over half-year extension to finish her writing tasks.

The initial target was to conduct six interviews with each student. Yet, the number of interviews varied from six to nine, depending largely on the participants' number of writing assignments. Four participants completed five assignments, while one student wrote four assignments. All participants produced a dissertation. Besides, there were unexpected events such as failure of assignments that triggered follow-up encounters. Additionally, the variation was explained by the participants' flow of speech. For instance, Rita spoke slowly and tended to provide lengthy accounts. Occasionally, I did not manage to cover all the topics within the planned time, so I had to arrange another meeting. The total number of interviews conducted with participants was thirty-five.

Table 4.4 shows details about the frequency of interviews and the time of the year they occurred.

**Table 4.4 The details about the research interviews**

|  | Oct./Nov. | Jan./Feb. | March/May | June/1st half of Aug. | End of Aug./Sep. | Extension April 2009 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Hannah** | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 7 |
| **Molly** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 6 |
| **Mary** | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 7 |
| **Oliver** | 0 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 6 |
| **Rita** | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 9 |

Initially, I planned to conduct an approximately one-hour interview. In practice, the length of interviews varied from thirty-five minutes to one hour and twenty-seven minutes. The discrepancy between the lengths of the interviews was due to the differences in students' speech flow and the number of events they had experienced. In total, I have gathered over thirty-one hours of students' accounts.

The first wave of interviews elaborated on students' prior writing experiences and their perceptions of themselves as academic writers. In addition, it covered participants' perceptions of writing, the values they attributed to writing, the features of good written work and students' preparedness for the new discipline. As Oliver joined the research in December, the first interview was held in January.

The next waves of interviewing explored the ways students completed their assignments, engaged in literacy practices and responded to tutors' and peer feedback. The interviews highlighted different changes that occurred in EAL students' perceptions of academic

writing and of themselves as writers. Toward the end of the longitudinal study, exit interviews were conducted to get retrospective students' insights about the course, their writing experiences and their improvements as academic writers. Most exit interviews were conducted at the end of August and beginning of September 2008, except Hannah's exit interview which was conducted in April 2009.

The majority of interviews were carried out in available rooms within WIE. Some were conducted in the social facilities within the university campus, depending largely on where students preferred to meet. The first interview I held in one of the campus cafés, but after I ran a check on the quality of the tape-recording I found out that the background noise was loud enough to interfere with its quality. Consequently, I decided to conduct the next interviews in smaller and less crowded spaces. All the interviews were conducted in the morning or early afternoon in the hope that both interviewer and interviewees would be alert at that stage of the day.

To prompt participants' recall and further disclosure of the writing stages they underwent, I asked students to send me their drafts and final versions of their assignments before the interviews. Additionally, I asked them to bring the tutor written feedback sheets. These pieces of work helped me gaining familiarity with their writing and contextualising the conversations around their assignments. Students referred to these documents to recall the writing processes they had engaged in. However, not all the students tended to submit their written assignments beforehand. Moreover, not all of them brought the feedback sheets to the interviews. More details on these issues will be presented in section 4.6.

I should acknowledge that not all interviews ran smoothly. At times, the interaction was anxiety-provoking and tense, as we discussed experiences related to failures or disappointment about grades. These types of experiences inhibited certain respondents to talk freely about them. I had to address these tensions carefully by being empathetic, giving supportive comments or even by changing the subject of discussion. Clearly, the experiences of learning to write in a new context were an emotional topic fraught with tensions, struggles and disappointment for most participants. In one instance, I identified from verbal and non-verbal clues that the respondent experienced psychological blocks and could not answer questions about her assignment failure. This prompted me to stop persisting. Yet, I tried to follow-up these enquiries in the next interviews when she felt more comfortable to talk about it. Interestingly, similar situations prompted other participants to be open and verbalise their perceptions of the writing processes, providing detailed descriptions of their feelings and interpretations of what happened to them.

### 4.4.8 Research Interviews with Tutors

I managed to interview five tutors who taught Masters modules at WIE. The main purpose of interviewing tutors was to find out their views on EAL students' writing difficulties and the approaches to teaching of academic writing. I gained consent to voice-record three tutors out of five. On the two other occasions, I had to take notes and to compose reports afterwards on what was said during the interviews. The length of the interviews varied between twenty to thirty-two minutes. Altogether, I collected two hours of conversations.

The interview schedules for tutors followed the same format: introductory expressions, a number of questions and concluding remarks. During these interviews, I followed the same techniques of asking questions and of probing that I employed during students' interviews.

## 4.5 Instrumentation: Choosing Qualitative Data Analysis Software

All the transcripts were analysed using NVivo software. The choice of this qualitative data analysis software was grounded in a number of reasons: (a) the tools and options it provides and (b) the availability of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software within Warwick University. This software is designed to help with managing the data, coding process, providing storage for memos and annotations, supporting conceptual and theoretical thinking about the data and with assisting in learning from the data without losing access to their contexts (Bazeley 2007).
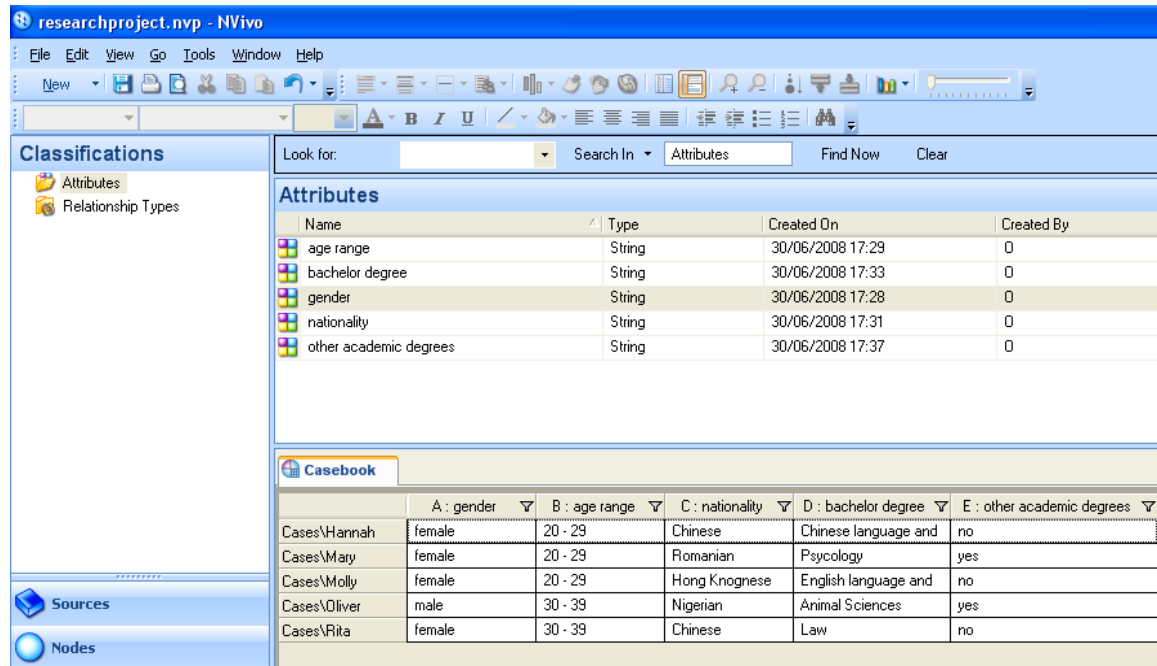
Despite these facilitative features, there are a number of criticisms of this software. The main concerns are that software may distance researchers from the data and may lead to qualitative data being analysed quantitatively (Barry 1998). Moreover, no computer software can perform qualitative data analysis of itself nor can it interpret the data for the researchers, as it depends on researchers' capacity to harness the tools to obtain the best from it (Bazelely 2007).

Bazelely argues that software provides researchers with both closeness and distance to their data. In terms of closeness to data, NVivo offers rapid access to retrieved passages of coded text to view them in their original contexts. As far as the distance from data is

concerned, it encompasses tools for modelling ideas and for interrogating the database. To make the most of the interview data, I accessed the transcripts on a numerous occasions to identify the main themes, develop categories, code them and check on their accuracy. At the same time, I had to be distant to be able to extract and synthesise the research findings. Moving between these tools, from the general to the specific and from the specific to the general, exploiting all the perspectives is characteristic of qualitative methods and contributes to a sophisticated analysis (Bazeley 2007). Essentially, to increase my expertise in using NVivo and to make the most of its tools and strategies, I took various training courses.

### 4.5.1 Coding in NVivo

This section provides several examples of how NVivo tools have been used to store, code and access the interview data. Firstly, all the interview transcripts were imported into the project where I created five cases to correspond to each research participant, giving pseudonyms. I also assigned attributes for each case to keep track of the participants' demographic properties (see Figure 4.2).

**Figure 4.2 Cases and assigned attribute values**



In NVivo, coding involved identifying references to different ideas and concepts within

sources and connecting them to the nodes that exemplified the same theoretical or

descriptive idea (Gibbs 2002). NVivo operates with two types of nodes: Free Nodes and

Tree Nodes. Free Nodes are often segments selected from the data that serve to store

surprises. However, this study did not include this type of nodes but rather kept the

information in the Tree nodes to produce a simpler representation. Tree Nodes were

hierarchically structured with categories and sub-categories that displayed graphically

the node arrangement and the nature of their connections. Consequently, Tree Nodes

helped me to make nodes easy to find and be ordered logically. Figure 4.3 shows an

excerpt of the tree nodes that were generated during the process of refining categories.

**Figure 4.3 Tree nodes**
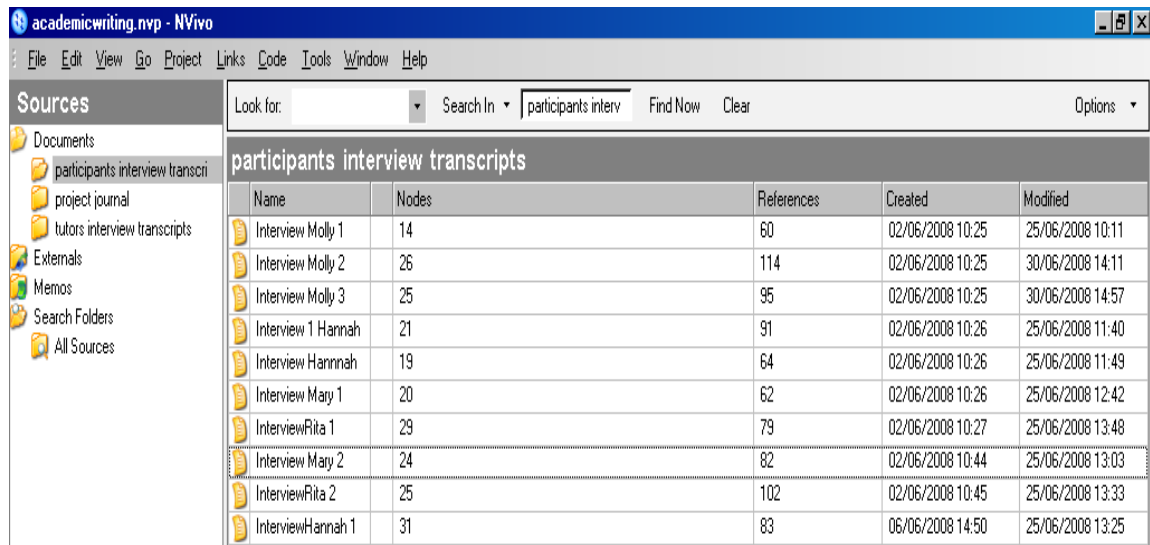
| Name | Sources | References | Created | Modified |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| perceptions of writing | 9 | 66 | 02/06/2008 11:21 | 05/06/2008 17:46 |
| efficient writing skills | 4 | 10 | 02/06/2008 12:23 | 04/06/2008 15:55 |
| native vs. english writing | 5 | 18 | 02/06/2008 11:30 | 06/06/2008 15:15 |
| perceptions of peer feedback | 7 | 13 | 02/06/2008 16:12 | 05/06/2008 15:47 |
| perceptions of tutor feedback | 6 | 39 | 03/06/2008 15:53 | 06/06/2008 15:01 |
| purpose of writing | 5 | 11 | 02/06/2008 11:58 | 04/06/2008 15:45 |
| perceptions of writing quality | 0 | 0 | 02/06/2008 13:51 | 02/06/2008 13:56 |
| mixed | 4 | 8 | 03/06/2008 11:57 | 05/06/2008 17:24 |
| negative | 5 | 8 | 02/06/2008 13:55 | 05/06/2008 17:22 |
| positive | 5 | 12 | 03/06/2008 11:18 | 04/06/2008 23:12 |
| previous writing experience | 6 | 20 | 02/06/2008 11:17 | 06/06/2008 15:02 |
| educational background | 5 | 8 | 03/06/2008 17:25 | 06/06/2008 14:57 |
| peer feedback | 3 | 9 | 02/06/2008 11:48 | 06/06/2008 15:15 |
| tutor feedback | 4 | 16 | 02/06/2008 11:41 | 06/06/2008 15:03 |
| writing classes | 5 | 28 | 02/06/2008 11:19 | 06/06/2008 15:01 |
| self-perceptions as writers | 1 | 1 | 02/06/2008 15:53 | 02/06/2008 15:55 |
| average self-esteem | 1 | 3 | 04/06/2008 15:52 | 04/06/2008 15:52 |
| high self-esteem | 7 | 19 | 02/06/2008 15:55 | 05/06/2008 17:47 |
| positive affective spectrum | 4 | 11 | 04/06/2008 13:31 | 05/06/2008 17:49 |
| low self-esteem | 3 | 8 | 03/06/2008 15:04 | 04/06/2008 15:42 |
| negative affective spectrum | 5 | 19 | 03/06/2008 18:20 | 05/06/2008 17:49 |
| university-course choice | 2 | 9 | 11/06/2008 11:16 | 11/06/2008 11:16 |
| writing issues | 5 | 8 | 02/06/2008 11:51 | 05/06/2008 17:09 |
| language | 6 | 20 | 02/06/2008 11:52 | 05/06/2008 17:10 |
| referencing | 5 | 16 | 03/06/2008 15:23 | 05/06/2008 17:19 |
| subject understanding | 4 | 9 | 03/06/2008 11:07 | 03/06/2008 21:37 |
| syntax | 1 | 3 | 04/06/2008 13:15 | 04/06/2008 13:17 |

NVivo provided the facility for browsing the coded segments that occurred at each node and for tracking down the occurrences of references. As Miles and Huberman (1994) stated, the browsed snippets are not cut away from the original – researchers can see them in their context, if necessary returning to the whole document. That allowed me to return to the coded references to explore the context. For instance, Figure 4.4 discloses an excerpt of data segments for the node 'Native versus English writing'.

129

**Figure 4.4 Text retrieval**
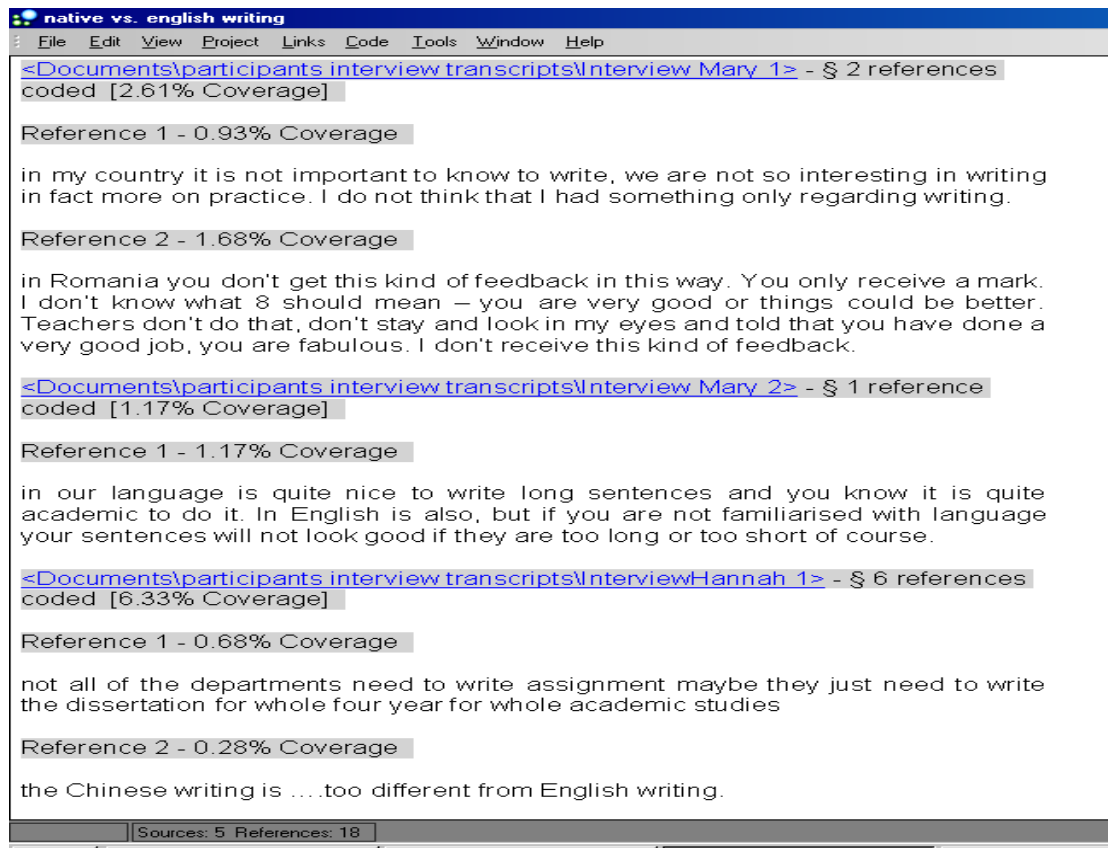


NVivo offered a general overview of the total number of nodes and reference occurrences and the contexts they occurred. According to Figure 4.5, there were twenty-four categories and subcategories that appeared in eighty-two text segments in the interview transcript (2) conducted with Mary and twenty-five categories and subcategories that occurred in 102 instances in the interview (2) with Rita.

**Figure 4.5 Report on number of nodes and references**



The tools in NVivo were flexible, generating changes in conceptualisation and

organisation of nodes as the project developed. Bazeley and Richards (2000) argue that

NVivo enables researchers to return, revisit, rethink and reinterpret data as they get a

firmer sense of what is going on within their research. The arrangement of nodes can be

reorganised to accommodate the growing understanding of the investigated topic. For

instance, as the research evolved I could notice that students tended to express a range of

affective states, such as frustration, anger, happiness, etc. that I had not considered when

embarking on the project. Consequently, I created a new node *affective dimension* to

refer to participants' affective states. Further details on the process of developing and

refining categories will be presented in section 4.5.3.

### 4.5.2 Analytical Procedure for Qualitative Data Analysis

Content analysis was employed to analyse tutors' written feedback and semi-structured

interviews. Content analysis is broadly defined as a "technique for making inferences by

objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (Holsti 1969, p.14). There is a heated debate among researchers about whether content analysis should be quantitative or qualitative in nature (Berg 2004). The literature on data analysis instruments defines it as "an approach to the analysis of documents and texts that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner" (Bryman 2008, p.275). From this perspective, this technique aims at identifying the major categories and computing their frequency across texts to gain a better understanding of the investigated phenomenon (Kvale 2007).

There has been a recent tendency to apply qualitative content analysis to transcripts of semi- and unstructured interviews and case studies (Bryman 2008). This approach suggests breaking down textual data into small units and then rearranging them into categories that facilitate a better understanding of the research questions (Teddlie & Tashakkori 2009). Furthermore, Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009, p.25) propose contextualising (holistic) strategies that may enable researchers to "interpret narrative data in the context of a coherent whole text that includes interconnections among the narratives elements such as statements, events". This technique involves looking for patterns across the interconnecting narratives in the data, acknowledging that the phenomenon is context-sensitive. Not every part of the process should be indexed into a common set of categories and should be studied as a whole rather than solely its parts or objects (ibid.). In this vein, I read each transcript several times to gain a better understanding of each participant's writing experiences as a whole rather than focusing only on particular themes. This work employed both quantitative and qualitative

approaches to analysing the textual data and bringing together a more comprehensive account of academic writing.

### *4.5.3 Qualitative Content Analysis Approach*

In terms of qualitative approaches to analysing the narrative data, categories were developed and applied to the interview texts. To develop the conceptual categories, I tried largely to derive them from the theoretical framework and from the interview transcripts. There is a commonly-accepted belief that "a rich source of ideas for categories can be found in the questions in terms of which the research originated and developed" (Dey 1993, p.99). Thus, such categories as *self-perceptions as writers*, *perceptions of writing*, *previous writing experience* and *writing stages* emerged from the research questions and objectives. However, data analysis was not bound by the research questions and theoretical framework, but was also directed by other means of generating the descriptive categories.

Miles and Huberman (1994) indicated several tools for coding data. One technique entails a quick read through the document and a broad-brush coding of wide topics, such as whole paragraphs or speaking turns or responses to questions. To start coding, I chose two interview transcripts: one transcript which was rich in details and the second which provided less detailed responses. Additionally, the transcripts offered a contrast in terms of student motivation, ways of writing and perceptions of oneself as an academic writer. The first reading was quick, providing an overview of the data and specific themes to be watched for in the other transcripts. This process of coding led to the formulation of an initial framework of six main categories and nineteen subcategories (see Table 4.5).

**Table 4.5 Initial categories (I)**

| Categories | Sub-categories |
|---|---|
| **Prior writing experience** | Amount<br>Types of writing<br>Writing practices |
| **Self-perceptions as academic writer** | Positive<br>Negative<br>Mixed |
| **Perceptions of writing process** | Writing process<br>Support<br>Revision |
| **Composing behaviour** | Avoidance, adoption, assimilation<br>Writing stages<br>Writing strategies |
| **Writing issues** | Managing the resources<br>Motivation<br>Time management<br>Writing blocks |
| **Development as an academic writer** | New writing strategies<br>Awareness of writing process<br>Self-esteem as an academic writer |

Next, Miles and Huberman (1994) noted that once the relevant concepts become clearer,

researchers can work reflectively through transcripts reading line-by-line to develop

more discrete coding categories. Accordingly, in a second reading the initial conceptual

framework was applied to two other transcripts. I read line-by-line each participant's

response, each word combination, sentence and/or paragraph to categorise them into an

existing category or into a new assigned category. Excerpts that were deemed irrelevant

were assigned to the node *not applicable*. The second reading yielded in total ten

categories, thirty-six subcategories and three sub-, subcategories (see Table 4.6).

**Table 4.6 Major categories (II)**

| Categories | Sub-categories |
|---|---|
| **Composing behaviour** | Acceptance<br>Resistance<br>Writing strategies |
| **Motivation** | Extrinsic motivation<br>Intrinsic motivation |
| **Perceptions of writing** | Efficient writing skills<br>Native vs. English<br>Perceptions of peer feedback<br>Perceptions of tutor feedback<br>Purpose of writing |
| **Perceptions of writing quality** | Negative<br>Positive<br>Mixed |
| **Previous writing experience** | Educational background<br>Peer feedback<br>Tutor feedback<br>Writing classes |
| **Self-perceptions as writers** | Average self-esteem<br>High self-esteem<br>• Positive affective spectrum<br>Low self-esteem<br>• Negative affective spectrum |
| **Writing issues** | Language (grammar, selling, wrong wording)<br>Referencing<br>Subject understanding<br>Syntax<br>Task understanding<br>Time management<br>Word limit<br>Writing blocks<br>Critical/uncritical |
| **Writing process** | Learning outcomes<br>Module background<br>Revision<br>Potential revision changes<br>Support<br>• Perceptions of support<br>Writing stages<br>Writing task |
| **University/course choice** | |
| **Not applicable** | |

Such concepts as *extrinsic/intrinsic motivation, feedback, subject understanding, Native vs. English writing, perception of support*, etc. emerged during reading the transcripts carefully for a second time.

The earlier coding of the first two transcripts was invalidated and they were coded again, as more detailed codes were generated. Furthermore, the new conceptual categories were tested on subsequent transcripts to check on the relevance and richness of the categories and to facilitate the generation of theoretical points about the researched subject. According to Gibbs (2002, p.167), the new data "provide the research with information that can increase the 'density' and 'saturation' of the emerging categories and themes". Density refers to the idea of a richer, more detailed and theoretically sensitive concept; whereas, saturation refers to the case when no more data collection or analysis reveals any more information.

Next, I proceeded with coding of another eight transcripts. At the end of this stage, I analysed the number of recurrences of each category. I located categories that had similar labels and/or contents, addressing the same conceptual theme. Additionally, I realised that it was not practical to segment the data into tiny chunks to capture each detail and simultaneously to make sense of the overall picture. As my knowledge about the data and confidence in using NVivo advanced, I reconsidered and reconfigured what I was doing. I also submitted the list of categories and subcategories alongside a piece of interview transcript to my supervisors. After some discussion, another framework of eight categories and twenty-seven subcategories (see Table 4.7) was developed and applied subsequently to all research transcripts.

**Table 4.7 Major categories (III)**

| Categories | Sub-categories |
|---|---|
| **Previous writing experience** | Educational background<br>Peer feedback<br>Tutor feedback<br>Writing classes |
| **Composing behaviour** | Writing stages<br>Support<br>Motivation<br>Writing strategies<br>Module background |
| **Perceptions of writing** | Perceptions of the quality of writing<br>Native vs. English writing<br>Perceptions of learning outcome |
| **Perceptions of support** | University support<br>Department support<br>Module support<br>Desirable support |
| **Writing issues** | Form (i.e. grammar, spelling, language expressions, wrong wording)<br>Critique/uncritical<br>Referencing<br>Subject understanding<br>Syntax<br>Task understanding<br>Misunderstanding tutor-student<br>Time management<br>Word limit<br>Writing blocks<br>Presentation |
| **Self-perceptions as writers** | |
| **Affective dimension** (distress, guilt, sadness, confidence) | |
| **Non-applicable** | |

The research started with a list of categories that evolved as I made more decisions about which bits of data could or could not be assigned to the existing categories. Categories that emerged during data analysis seemed to be better grounded empirically and revealed that "the researcher is open to what the site has to say, rather than determined to force-fit the data into pre-existing codes" (Miles & Huberman 1994, p.62).

137

The same procedures and tools were applied to code the semi-structured interviews conducted with tutors. Thus, I read line-by-line each response to categorise it into an existing category or into a new assigned category. The careful reading yielded four categories and seventeen subcategories (see Table 4.8).

**Table 4.8 Major categories of interviews with tutors**

| Categories | Subcategories |
|---|---|
| **Perceptions of support** | University support<br>Departmental support<br>Module support |
| **Perceptions of students' writing issues** | Language competence<br>Critique<br>Constructing an argument<br>Logic flow<br>Relevance of materials<br>Presentation<br>Grammatical accuracy |
| **Marking preferences** | Critique<br>Constructing an argument<br>Logic flow<br>Relevance of materials<br>Presentation<br>Grammatical accuracy<br>Other |
| **Non-applicable** | |

The next important stage in data analysis was to link categories together in meaningful ways in which it would be possible to classify and compare the important themes and to analyse the correlation between the variables and make inferences (Merriam 1998). This analysis consisted of comparing the data between two or more categories and subcategories to identify possible connections and relationships in the findings. For instance, I examined the correlation between students' self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers and tutor written feedback.

### 4.5.4 Quantitative Content Analysis

The current study applied a priori categories such as 'content' and 'form' comments to analyse tutors' feedback sheets, which were ultimately computed into percentage to show the focus of tutors' comments. There has been a number of models for classifying teacher comments, focusing on contrasting large-scale areas such as content vs. form, local vs. global issues and high order vs. low order concerns (Hyland & Hyland 2001). In this study, I referred to content vs. form categories as they seem to be self-evident concepts and to address the key types of comments tutors normally provide. Thus, content category includes comments referring to subject knowledge, analysis of materials, constructing the arguments and organisation of written text. Form category includes language, grammar, typographical errors, punctuation and referencing conventions.

Importantly, the data set of the current study is analysed according to parallel mixed data analysis (Teddlie & Tashakkuri 2009). This approach included two separate processes: quantitative analysis of data, using descriptive and correlational statistics and qualitative analysis of data, employing the quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Even though, the two sets of analyses are independent, each provided better understandings of the phenomenon, which ultimately were linked and combined into meta-inferences (ibid.).

### *4.5.5 Reliability of Coding Process*

To enhance the reliability of themes and codes, I firstly invited a doctoral student from WIE to read through an entire transcript and discern the major topics. She generated a detailed list of themes therein, including five major topics and twenty-two subcategories (see Appendix 4.7). Her categories overlapped largely with the list I had elaborated. The only differences were that she raised some nuanced aspects of students' *reactions to grading* and encompassed them in a separate category; whereas, I included these aspects in the subcategory of *perceptions of support*. I based this decision on the belief that grades and feedback referred altogether to the extended support students received during the year. This category expanded therefore to include participants' perceptions of the comments and of their reactions to grades.

I also ran an inter-reliability check on coding data and on the coding process. I submitted a fragment of interview transcript to a PhD student to apply the categories. Firstly, I ran a training session to explain the categories I had elaborated to the student. Then, we coded a fragment together to check whether she understood the categories. Later she coded an excerpt of transcript individually, which I analysed and calculated the inter-coder agreement index following the formula provided by Miles and Huberman (1994). The index was 82%, which is close to the recommended percentage of coder agreement in social sciences. The outcome denotes that coders agreed that the categories were discreet enough to cover all the narratives and to express the same meaning.

Additionally, I submitted to another PhD student two tutors' feedback sheets to apply the a priori categories and to compute the inter-coder agreement. As in the previous

case, I conducted training with the student and then he coded the texts individually. The results showed that the inter-coder agreement was 91.6% for the first feedback sheet and for the second was 93%. I believe that this large percentage was due to the small number of categories the coder was asked to apply. Thus, the list consisted of only two a priori categories – content vs. form.

## 4.6 Tutors' Feedback Sheets

At the beginning of the research, I asked for students' consent to allow me to make photocopies of the written feedback sheets. All the participants except one completed five assignments; whereas, Molly wrote four assignments. Out of twenty-four possible feedback sheets, I managed to gather twelve feedback sheets (see Table 4.9). Students claimed that they had misplaced the other feedback sheets. Yet, I believe that some students did not want to share them for personal reasons.

The feedback sheets were analysed in terms of the length and focus of feedback (i.e. content vs. form comments). They also served as a source of corroboration and refutation of the findings on students' perceptions of tutors' feedback. Moreover, during interviews students were referred to the feedback sheets if they brought them in to answer questions about tutor's feedback.

**Table 4.9 Number of the tutors' feedback sheets per participant**

| Participants | Number of feedback sheets |
|---|---|
| Hannah | 5 |
| Oliver | 1 |
| Molly | 3 |
| Rita | 3 |
| Mary | 0 |

141

Participants did not submit the feedback sheets they had received for their dissertations, as the results were delivered at the end of October – the beginning of November when the majority of participants either left UK or moved to another city and this study ended.

## 4.7 Students' Notes and Written Work

At the beginning of this study, I asked the participants to keep logs of any thoughts about their writing experiences. Unfortunately, it did not work well because the academic course was quite intense. Also, they were not used to keeping such logs. However, two participants occasionally wrote down ideas about their writing and their further goals of developing as writers. The participants referred to these jottings particularly during the first two interviews, providing additional details about how they wrote and what their goals were. At the end of term two, however, they stopped keeping logs due to the time limit.

I also asked students to send their drafts and the final versions of assignments before the interviews. I have gathered seventeen final versions and a number of drafts for ten assignments. Collecting participants' drafts was not an easy process. Three participants did not keep drafts, as they made corrections on the same versions without saving into separate documents. A student reported not revising her drafts because she had no time to read through and edit it. In addition, there was a discrepancy between how students defined the term 'draft' and my understanding, illustrating that EAL students might have misunderstood some important concepts that tutors had employed during the module classes. Two students defined 'draft' as a saved copy of each chapter or part of the assignment. Therefore, one assignment could contain four drafts – one saved copy/draft

for introduction, one for chapter two, another saved draft/copy for chapter three and the

last one for conclusions. The details about the numbers of submitted drafts are showed

below in Table 4.10.

**Table 4.10 Number of submitted drafts sheets per participant**

| Participants | Number of submitted drafts | Number of submitted assignments |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Hannah | 0 | 2 |
| Oliver | 0 | 3 |
| Molly | 0 | 3 |
| Rita | 11 | 5 |
| Mary | 7 | 4 |

## 4.8 Summary

This chapter presented the rationale for employing the research data collection methods,

which consisted of self-completion questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, tutors'

feedback and students' notes. The data analysis procedures were also described. A

number of procedures were identified to address the pitfalls and difficulties encountered

in collecting and analysing the research data.

The next chapters will present the research findings that emerged from quantitative and

qualitative data analysis.

# Chapter 5 – Quantitative Results

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the results from the questionnaire administered to Masters students in October 2007 and October 2008 at WIE. The data was analysed according to respondents' English-speaking status and gender. On occasions when statistically significant differences were recorded for these two variables, the data sets are presented in tandem. Otherwise, the findings are presented as one data set. This chapter gives an overview of students' prior writing experiences in terms of amount of writing and writing practices they had experienced in their previous educational degree(s). The chapter also covers students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers. Finally, respondents' views are used to draw a profile of a 'good academic writer'.

## 5.2 Respondents' Prior Writing Experiences

This study investigated the research question:

*What were Masters students' writing experiences during their previous major educational degree(s)?*

Descriptive analysis was deployed to explore students' previous writing experiences. Regarding the quantity of academic writing produced by respondents, findings suggested

that the overwhelming majority of NES students had frequently produced written assignments in their previous degree(s), while EAL students seemed to have written academically less frequently. As table 5.1 shows, less than half of EAL students had frequently produced written texts compared with well over three quarters of NES students. The cross tabulation analysis disclosed a statistically significant difference among NES and EAL students' amount of academic writing they produced (chi square=23.491, df=2, p=.001). Hence, NES students entered academia with more extensive experience of writing academically than EAL students.

**Table 5.1 Amount of academic writing experienced by NES and EAL students.**

|  | Amount of academic writing | | |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | Frequently | Sometimes | Hardly at all |
| **NES Students  n=53** | 84.9% | 3.8% | 11.8% |
| **EAL students  n=67** | 47.8% | 41.8% | 10.4% |

Table 5.2 illustrates the amount of writing practices undergone by Master students. Accordingly, only a minority of students had frequently experienced academic writing classes, peer feedback, tutor feedback and collaborative writing. Findings indicated that almost two thirds of the Masters students claimed to have never taken an academic writing class; over one third had never experienced peer feedback and a quarter had not received any tutor feedback; and, less than half of Masters students had never undergone collaborative tasks in their previous academic degree(s).

**Table 5.2 Amount of writing practices undergone by Masters students.**

| Amount of academic writing practices | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | frequently (> 3) | sometimes (1 - 3) | never | N |
| **Class in academic writing** | 14.2% | 20.8% | 65.0% | 120 |
| **Collaborative writing task** | 14.3% | 42.9% | 42.9% | 119 |
| **Peer feedback** | 16.8% | 47.1% | 36.1% | 119 |
| **Tutor feedback** | 24.4% | 50.4% | 25.2% | 119 |

As table 5.3 shows, the distribution of NES and EAL students' experiences of writing

practices differed to some extent.

**Table 5.3 Amount of writing practices undergone by EAL and NES students.**

| | | frequently (> 3) | sometimes (1 - 3) | never |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Class in academic writing** | NES n=53 | 3.8% | 9.4% | 86.8% |
| | EAL n=67 | 22.4% | 29.9% | 47.8% |
| **Collaborative writing task** | NES n=53 | 3.8% | 41.5% | 54.7% |
| | EAL n=66 | 22.7% | 43.9% | 33.3% |
| **Peer feedback** | NES n=53 | 20.8% | 49.1% | 30.2% |
| | EAL n=66 | 13.6% | 45.5% | 40.9% |
| **Tutor feedback** | NES n=53 | 24.5% | 45.3% | 30.2% |
| | EAL n=66 | 24.2% | 54.5% | 21.2% |

Overall, over one fifth of EAL students had attended at least three academic writing

classes compared to a tiny proportion of NES students (see Figure 5.1). The cross

tabulation analysis disclosed a statistically significant difference between the amount of

academic writing classes NES and EAL students undertook (chi square=20.094, df=2,

p=.000), showing that the great majority of NES students had never attended an

academic writing class compared with less than half of EAL students.
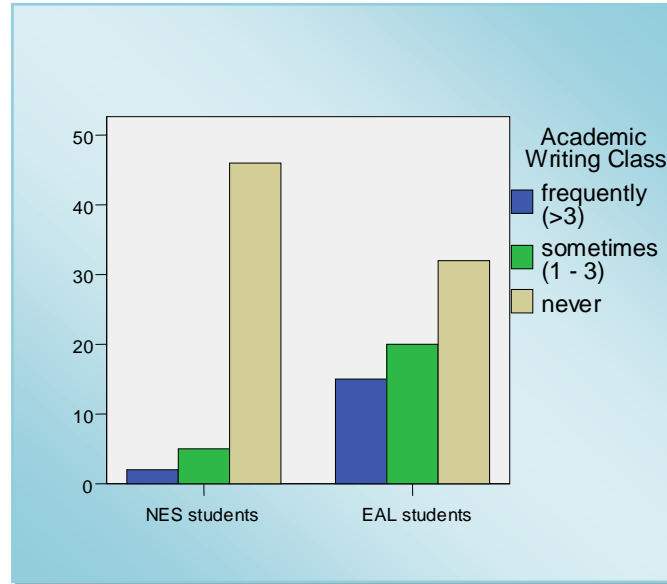


**Figure 5.1 Differences between the amount of academic writing classes**
**NES and EAL students experienced in their previous courses.**

One possible explanation of EAL students' greater experience of academic writing

classes might be the provision of writing classes as part of their second or foreign

language curriculum and of their preparation for taking IELTS. In addition, a number of

EAL students had attended the pre-sessional courses before starting their academic

course at WIE, which introduced them to writing conventions and norms. Besides,

educational organisations (e.g. British Council, Open Society Institute and Soros

Foundations Network) that financially supported some international students provided

information on academic writing before they started their academic degrees in the UK.

Another possible explanation might be that there were many mature students (53%)

among the NES students who graduated some time ago when academic writing was not

explicitly taught.

Further, as the graphical representations show (see Table 5.3 & Figure 5.2), NES

students had experienced fewer collaborative writing tasks than EAL students. Only a

small number of NES students and over one fifth of EAL students had experienced

collaborative writing tasks in their previous academic degree; whereas, over half of NES

students compared with only a third of EAL students had never experienced

collaborative writing tasks. There was a statistically significant difference between NES

and EAL students' previous experience of collaborative writing tasks (chi

square=10.569, df=2, p=.005).
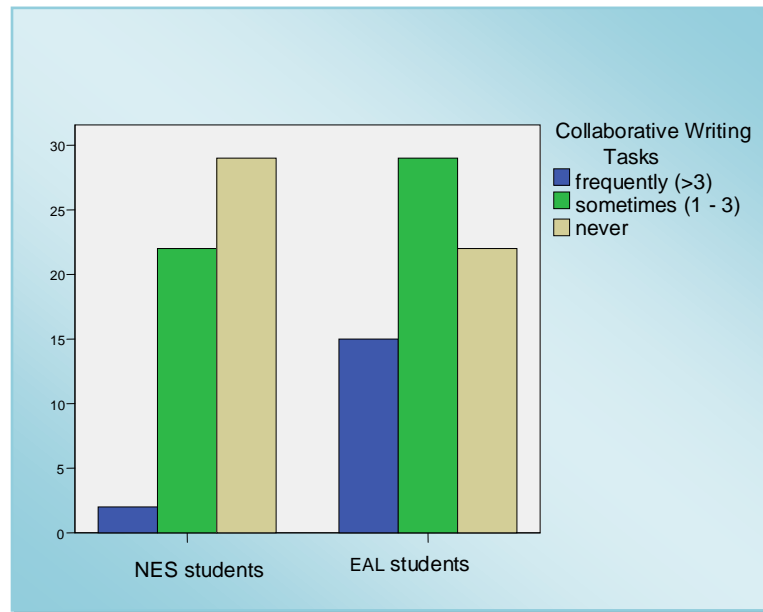


**Figure 5.2 Differences between the amount of collaborative
writing tasks NES and EAL students undertook.**

Findings also showed that both groups, irrespective of their language status, reported

similar experiences of receiving tutor and/or peer feedback.

Participants' limited experiences of writing classes, collaborative writing tasks and

feedback made further analysis of how these writing practices had impacted on the

development of their writing skills inappropriate. For instance, a large proportion of

148

students (65.0%) had never attended an academic writing class. Thus, to say whether there was a statistically significant relationship between students who had attended academic writing classes and their self-efficacy beliefs as writers was not possible.

Furthermore, when rating the usefulness of these writing practices, some students appeared to offer a general response on how these items affected academic writers, but not on how they had contributed to their personal development as writers. For instance, a great majority of students (65%) had never attended an academic writing class, however, when asked how writing classes impacted on their writing skills, only less than half (42.5%) reported that they had not experienced writing classes. Accordingly, over one fifth of students (22.5%) who had not attended writing classes actually believed that they enhanced their writing skills. Respondents might have misunderstood or misinterpreted the questions and instructions, which ultimately limited the confidence in these findings.

When asked to rate the usefulness of particular academic practices, three quarters of students who had experienced writing classes thought that they were very useful or useful for developing their writing skills, while a small percentage had found them not very useful or not at all useful (see Table 5.4). Almost half of students who experienced collaborative writing tasks considered them very useful or useful, while almost one quarter found them either not very useful or not at all useful. Clearly, students valued collaborative writing tasks less than other literacy practices.

**Table 5.4 Responses regarding the usefulness of academic practices for respondents' writing skills**

|  | Academic writing class* (%) | Collaborative writing* (%) | Tutor feedback* (%) | Peer feedback* (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| very useful | 56.7 | 26.1 | 51.5 | 34.6 |
| useful | 17.3 | 20.5 | 29.1 | 26.7 |
| neither useful nor inutile | 17.3 | 29.5 | 8.7 | 22.8 |
| not very useful | 5.8 | 15.9 | 8.7 | 9.9 |
| not at all useful | 2.9 | 8.0 | 2.0 | 6.0 |

**\*n=120**

More respondents valued tutor feedback than peer feedback. The great majority of respondents reported that tutor feedback was either very useful or useful compared to under two thirds who thought that peer feedback had had positive effects on their writing. Additionally, findings showed that one tenth of those who had experienced tutor feedback believed that tutor feedback was not useful. At the same time, nearly a sixth of students thought that peer feedback was unhelpful.

Concerning the types of writing produced by Masters students, findings showed that all respondents regardless of language status had previously produced a limited amount of types of writing. The only type of writing that the majority of respondents had produced was essay writing. Thus, the vast majority of NES students (86.8%) and nearly half of EAL students (45.5%) indicated that they had frequently written essays. However, almost half of EAL students (42.4%) had undergone modest experiences of essay writing. Additionally, over one tenth of EAL students (12.1%) reported that they had never written essays. Figure 5.3 displays these differences graphically.
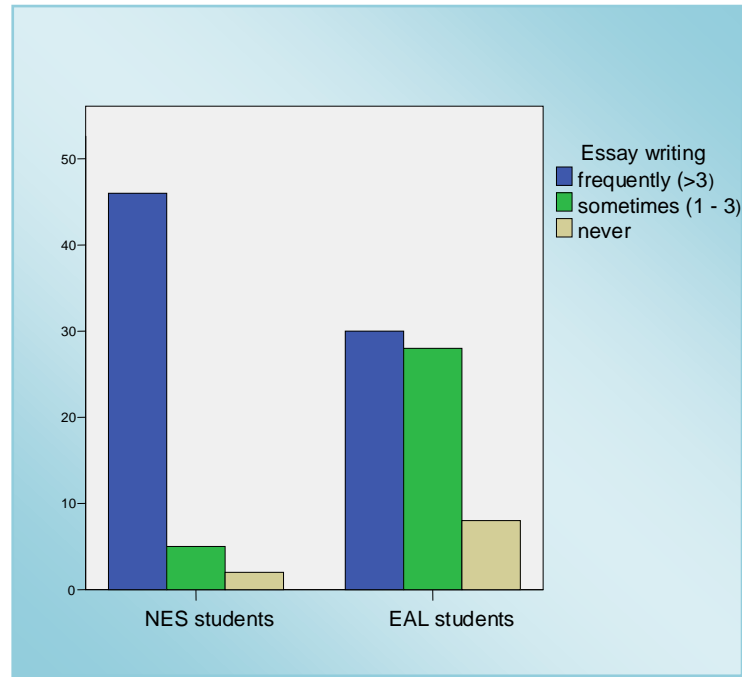
**Figure 5.3 Differences between British and EAL students'
amount of essay writing. (n=120)**

Furthermore, the least common types of writing for both groups were *statistical presentation* – over half of respondents (54.6%) had never experienced it; *creative writing* (51.8%); *critique* (36.1%) and *thesis writing* (31.4%). Besides, over one quarter (28.6%) had never produced a *report* and over one quarter (26.3%) had not written a *literature review*.

Accordingly, the results show that students enrolled for Master Taught courses at WIE typically came from a wide variety of educational and cultural backgrounds and they brought different writing experiences from their earlier degrees. Although the majority of Masters students indicated that they wrote academically quite often, they tended to have received a limited preparation for writing academically within a HE context. Thus, many students claimed to have never experienced tutor and peer feedback. Some students believed that feedback was unhelpful. Besides, a great deal of students had

undergone limited types of writing. Thus, they had never completed statistical presentations, critique, thesis, reports and literature review, which represented fundamental features of assessment in their current context. The results also suggested that NES students were better prepared for producing extended assignments (e.g. essays) than EAL students. Essentially, students' perceptions of writing practices and their limited writing experiences may compromise how they participate in literacy practices and how they respond to feedback.

## 5.3 Students' Perceptions of Themselves as Academic Writers

This study investigated the research question:

*What were students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers at the beginning of their academic course?*

The data analysis revealed that respondents had mixed perceptions of themselves as academic writers. Findings showed that the most common responses to the statement "*I think I am a good writer*" were either the positive spectrum of responses (i.e. *strongly agree* or *agree*) or the neutral response (i.e. *neither agree nor disagree*). Therefore, nearly half of students (43.3%) indicated that they were good writers. Likewise, almost half (42.5%) acknowledged that they had neutral perceptions of themselves as academic writers (see Table 5.5). Well over one tenth of respondents (14.2%) displayed a disagreement with the abovementioned statement.

**Table 5.5 Students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers. (n=120)**

**'I think I am a good writer'**

| Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7.5% | 35.8% | 42.5% | 11.7% | 2.5% |

Data revealed some statistically significant differences between NES and EAL students. As Table 5.6 shows, over half of NES students believed that they were good academic writers; whereas, only one third of EAL students had the same positive perceptions. Besides, a larger number of EAL students displayed negative beliefs as writers compared with less than one tenth of NES students.

**Table 5.6 NES and EAL students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers**

| | 'I think I am good writer' | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
| **NES students N=53** | 13.2% | 43.4% | 34.0% | 9.4% | 0.0% |
| **EAL students N=67** | 3.0% | 29.9% | 49.3% | 13.4% | 4.5% |

**chi square=10.045, df=4, p=.04**

Furthermore, male students were more likely to consider themselves *good writers* than female students (see Figure 5.4). Over half of male students (53.0%) believed that they were *good writers* and only a tiny percentage (5.9%) thought they were poor writers. In addition, there were no male students who strongly disagreed with the statement "*I think I am a good writer*". On the other hand, over one third of female students (39.5%) thought they were *good writers*; while three times as many (17.5%) disagreed with the

statement "*I think I am a good writer*". Further, there were three female students who strongly disagreed with the abovementioned statement. The cross tabulation analysis disclosed a statistically significant difference among male and female students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers (chi square=13.562, df=4, p=.009).
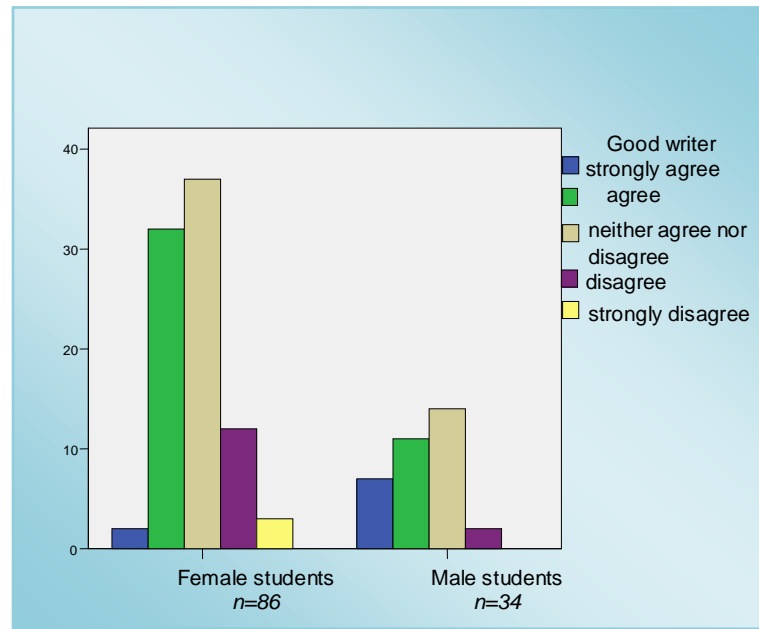


**Figure 5.4 Differences between male/female students'**
**self-efficacy beliefs as writers.**

The data analysis revealed further that an overwhelming majority of NES students (81.1%) reported that they enjoyed writing compared with just over half of EAL students (53.0%). A small percentage of EAL (9.1%) and even smaller percentage of NES students (3.8%) claimed they did not enjoy writing at all. Cross tabulation analysis also disclosed a statistically significant difference between NES and EAL students' perceptions of enjoying writing (chi-square=11.104, df=4, p=.025).

Table 5.7 display respondents' perceptions of how good they were at performing different writing tasks. No statistically significant difference was found between NES

and EAL students' beliefs about their writing skills. A great number of students expressed their confidence in their skills of organising arguments logically, expressing ideas clearly, being good at text mechanics, being aware of assessment criteria and marker's expectations. However, EAL students were more likely to disagree about being good at text mechanics and expressing their ideas clearly.

**Table 5.7 NES and EAL students' perceptions of their academic writing skills.**

|  | strongly agree | agree | neither agree nor disagree | disagree | strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **I am able to organize my arguments logically*** | 17.5% | 60.8% | 18.3% | 3.3% | .0% |
| **I am able to express my ideas clearly*** | 16.7% | 58.3% | 20.0% | 4.2% | .8% |
| **I am good at text mechanics (i.e. grammar, punctuation, spelling)*** | 18.3% | 40.0% | 27.5% | 13.3% | .8% |
| **I am aware of marker expectations*** | 7.5% | 47.5% | 31.7% | 13.3% | .0% |
| **I am aware of assessment criteria*** | 14.2% | 52.5% | 23.3% | 10.0% | .0% |

**\*n=120**

The results revealed an interesting discrepancy between students' general confidence in their writing skills and their confidence in their actual performance in their most recent assignment. Thus, a smaller percentage of respondents appeared to be confident to perform certain tasks than to express confidence in those writing skills generally. Table 5.8 shows that a large majority of students (75.0 %) reported believing to be good or very good at expressing their ideas clearly compared to only half (53.9%) who had found it very easy or easy to express their ideas clearly when producing their most recent assignment. An overwhelming majority (78.3%) indicated that they had found

155

developing the arguments logically an easy task compared to half (52.1%) who had

found it easy or very easy when completing the most recent assignment. The

discrepancy between next variables varied from 2 to 13 per cent.

**Table 5.8 Students' perceptions of easiness of applying writing skills.**

|  | Very easy | Easy | Neither easy nor difficult | Difficult | Very difficult |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **I am able to express my ideas clearly*** | 16.7% | 58.3% | 20.0% | 4.2% | .8% |
| **I could express my ideas clearly*** | 15.4% | 38.5% | 27.4% | 14.5% | 4.3% |
| **I am able to organize my arguments logically*** | 17.5% | 60.8% | 18.3% | 3.3% | .0% |
| **I could develop my arguments logically*** | 12.8% | 39.3% | 25.6% | 17.9% | 4.3% |
| **I am good at text mechanics (i.e. grammar, punctuation, spelling)*** | 18.3% | 40.0% | 27.5% | 13.3% | .8% |
| **I could write with grammatical accuracy*** | 17.9% | 30.8% | 28.2% | 18.8% | 4.3% |

**\*n=120**

As mentioned earlier, both groups tended to display similar perceptions of their writing

skills. However, findings revealed that EAL students had encountered difficulties in

referencing and in writing with grammatical accuracy more often than NES students.

The values for the statistically significant difference to the item '*referencing correctly

and consistently*' were chi square=14.026, df=4, p=.007 and the values to the item

'*writing with grammatical accuracy*' were chi square=14.350, df=4, p=.006.

Overall, NES students were more positive about themselves as academic writers than

EAL students. One possible explanation of EAL students' lower self-efficacy beliefs as

writers might be their limited experiences of writing academically and of completing different types of genre.

## 5.4 Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing

This study explored the research question:

*What were students' perceptions of academic writing when they started their current academic course?*

Students were asked to rate a list of features of academic writing in order of importance. Both groups generated a varying list of features. Table 5.9 shows that the major difference was that NES students rated *relevance of ideas to be included* as the second rank; whereas, EAL students placed it on the fifth rank. In addition, EAL students prioritised *logical organisation of arguments* and *originality of ideas* as more important than NES students. Additionally, EAL students prioritised *referencing correctly* over *correctness in grammar, spelling and punctuation* compared with NES students. These findings suggest a variation in respondents' views on the importance of writing features. Hence, students brought different views on writing that may influence the course of their actions while writing.

**Table 5.9 Lists of academic writing features**

| | NES students (n=49) | EAL students (n=50) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Clear expression of ideas | Clear expression of ideas |
| 2. | Relevance of ideas to be included | Logical organisation of arguments |
| 3. | Logical organisation of arguments | Originality of ideas |
| 4. | Originality of ideas | Appropriate use of language and structures for the discipline in which you are working |
| 5. | Appropriate use of language and structures for the discipline in which you are working | Relevance of ideas to be included |
| 6. | Correctness in grammar, spelling, and punctuation | Correct and consistent referencing |
| 7. | Correct and consistent referencing | Correctness in grammar, spelling, and punctuation |

Table 5.10 suggests that most students, regardless language status, agreed that the listed strategies were crucial to improve the quality of assignment. Almost three-quarters agreed that it was crucial to plan before starting to write, to revise the plan continuously while writing, to ask for tutor's feedback on a draft version, to draft more than once, to consider markers' expectations and assessment criteria as well as to edit the final draft. Despite an overall agreement, a small number of students disagreed upon the importance of these strategies. However, receiving students' comments on a draft version and attending sessions on academic writing in which pieces of good writing were modelled were considered less important in writing processes.

**Table 5.10 Respondents' perceptions of writing strategies**

| | Strongly agree (%) | Agree (%) | Neither agree nor disagree (%) | Disagree (%) | Strongly disagree (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| It is crucial to plan before starting to write (n=119) | 63.9 | 26.9 | 5.9 | 2.5 | 0.8 |
| It is essential to revise the plan continuously while writing | 35.0 | 45.8 | 16.7 | 1.7 | 0.8 |
| All academic writing should be drafted more than once (n=119) | 39.5 | 39.5 | 15.1 | 5.0 | 0.8 |
| It is essential to consider the markers' expectations before starting to write* | 31.7 | 50.8 | 11.7 | 5.8 | 0.0 |
| Being aware of the assessment criteria is important* | 36.7 | 55.0 | 6.7 | 1.7 | 0.0 |
| Receiving tutors' feedback on a draft version is important* | 53.3 | 39.2 | 6.7 | 0.8 | 0.0 |
| Receiving students' comments on a draft version is important* | 15.0 | 39.2 | 30.0 | 15.8 | 0.0 |
| Attending sessions on academic writing in which pieces of good writing are modelled is important* | 29.2 | 37.5 | 25.0 | 7.5 | 0.8 |
| The final draft should always be edited (i.e. checked for meaning mistakes, grammar or spelling mistakes)* | 72.5 | 23.3 | 4.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 |

*n=120

There was a statistically significant difference between the extent to which both groups agreed on the importance of receiving students' comments on a draft version and attending writing classes. Two thirds of EAL students (67.2%) compared to over one third of NES students (37.8%) believed that peer comments were important in completing a written assignment. Further, almost a third of NES students (28.3%) disagreed with this statement. Figure 5.5 summarises graphically the distribution of

students' perceptions of the importance of receiving students' comments on a draft

version.

**chi square=16.556, df=3, p=.001**
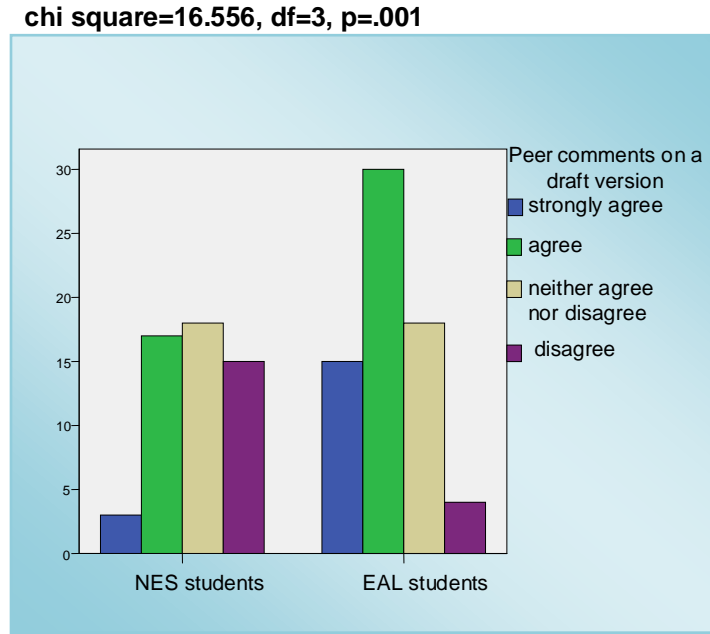


**Figure 5.5 Differences between NES and EAL students' perceptions
of the importance of receiving peer comments on a draft version.**

Additionally, there was a statistically significant difference between the views of NES

and EAL students on attending writing classes in which pieces of good writing are

modelled. A smaller percentage of NES students (50.9%) than EAL students (79.1%)

agreed with its contribution to the quality of writing. The statistical values were: chi

square=12.911, df=4, p=.012 (providing that the cut-point was p<.05). Figure 5.6 shows

graphically these values.
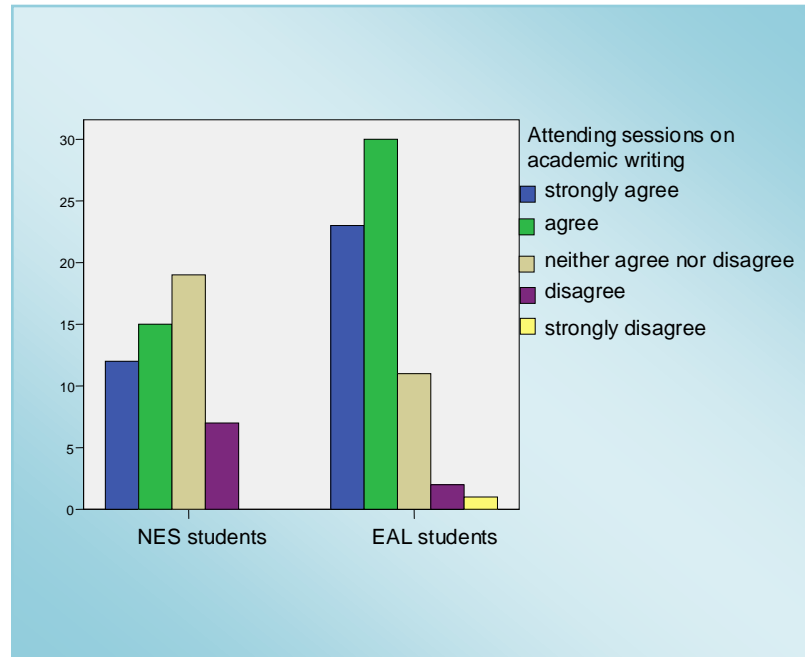
**Figure 5.6 Differences between NES and EAL students' perceptions of the importance of attending sessions on academic writing.**

It is difficult to explain why these differences emerged. A potential explanation is that the vast majority of NES students had not taken a writing class and they might have been unable to judge its usefulness. Further, a third of NES students had never received peer feedback. Although, they had experienced it more often than EAL students, they disagreed on the importance of this writing practice. Probably, NES students who had experienced peer feedback found it less helpful when completing an assignment. Summing up, these perceptions may constrain how students take advantage of the literacy practices provided in their course of studies.

## 5.5 Drawing the Profile of a 'Good Academic Writer'

Data analysis raised questions about whether there were any similarities and/or differences among respondents who thought they were good writers and those who held

161

negative self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers. A profile of a *good academic writer* was therefore drawn. The analysis focused on looking at the correlation between students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers and a range of variables that seemed to impact upon them.

Findings revealed students who considered themselves *good writers* were more likely *to enjoy writing* and *write for pleasure*. Hence, a statistically significant difference and a strong effect size (chi square=75.669, df=16, p=.000, phi=.797) were identified among the responses to the item '*I enjoy writing*' by "good writers" and between the two variables "*I often write for pleasure*" and "*I think I am a good writer*" (chi square=33.480, df=16, p=.006, phi=.530).

Essentially, a strong positive relationship and a high significance (p=0.000) was established between how students perceived themselves as writers and how others viewed them as academic writers. The Spearman's rho coefficient was 0.532 that indicated a strong relationship, suggesting that students who considered themselves as *good writers* were more likely to be viewed as *good writers* by their tutors. Additionally, there was established a moderate relationship (Spearman's rho=0.472) between students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers and peers' beliefs about their writing competence.

Data analysis indicated that nearly the same proportion of male and female students had received encouraging feedback from both tutors and peers. Thus, almost half of female (48.8%) and of male students (44.1%) acknowledged that their tutors had viewed them as *good writers*. Likewise, less than half of female students (44.7%) and over half of

male students (52.9%) indicated that their peers had thought they were *good writers* (see

Figure 5.4). However, male students tended to hold higher self-efficacy beliefs as writers

compared to the female respondents. Obviously, the numbers of male students was small

(n=34), so research findings can only be seen as suggestive rather than conclusive.

Further, students who considered themselves as *good writers* strongly agreed with the

statements about being able to organise arguments logically, being good at mechanics,

expressing ideas clearly and being aware of assessment criteria and of marker

expectations. These findings were also supported by their confidence in performing

these writing skills in their most recent assignment. Thus, they found it easier to

organise arguments logically, express their ideas clearly and write with grammatical

accuracy than students who did not perceive themselves as good writers. The

relationships between these variables were strong and statistically significant (see Table

5.11).

**Table 5.11 The values for statistical significance and effect size between variables.**

| Statements | Chi-square | Df | p value | phi |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I am able to organise my arguments logically | 38.841 | 12 | .000 | .570 |
| I am able to express my ideas clearly | 82.788 | 16 | .000 | .830 |
| I am good at text mechanics | 31.953 | 16 | .010 | .510 |

Moreover, students who regarded themselves as g*ood writers* compared with *bad writers*

or *neither good nor bad writers* were more likely to think that planning before starting to

write and attending sessions on academic writing in which pieces of writing were

modelled were crucial for writing academically. Nevertheless, the vast majority of

students, despite their contrasting self-efficacy beliefs as writers, agreed that revising the

plan continuously while writing, drafting an assignment more than once, asking for tutor's feedback on a draft version, considering markers' expectations and assessment criteria as well as editing the final draft were crucial writing strategies. Finally, there was no correlation between respondents who regarded themselves as good writers and their prior experiences of academic writing and academic writing practices. Students, who had frequently experienced written tasks or attended academic writing classes, were not more likely to hold positive views about themselves as writers than students who had undergone limited prior experiences.

Hence, the profile of a good writer suggested that students who thought they were good writers tended more often to enjoy writing and to write for pleasure. Good writers seemed to be more confident about their writing skills. Further, they were aware of a spectrum of writing strategies, which they regarded as indispensable when writing academically. The trends observed in the population of Masters students who believed they were good writers are summarised in Figure 5.7.
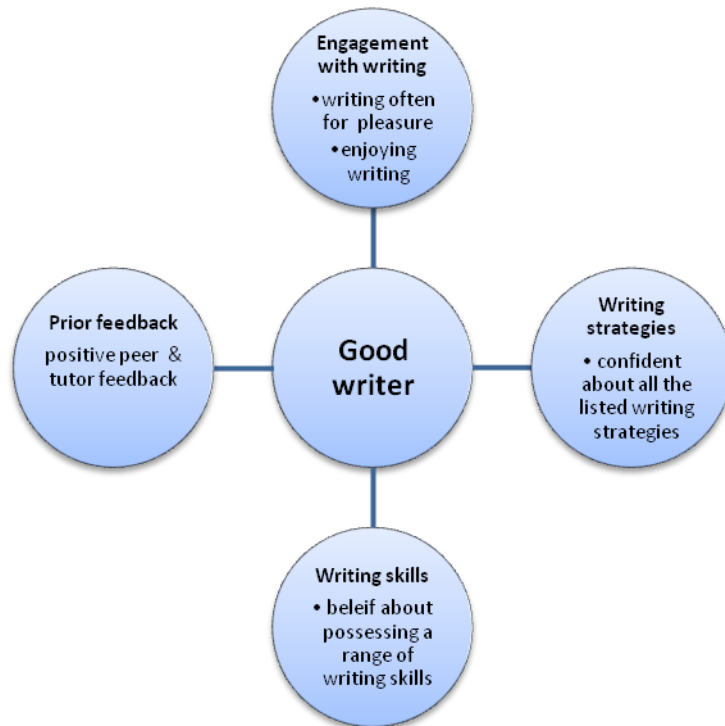
**Figure 5.7 Features of a good writer**

## 5.6 Summary

This chapter analysed the findings from the questionnaires administered to Masters students at WIE. Although, the questionnaire was conducted during two consecutive years, the number of responses was modest (n=120). This makes it unwise to generalise the findings to other populations from WIE or outside it, as other samples and contexts might be totally different with a cohort of students who have undergone different prior writing experiences and possessed different self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers. Consequently, the study findings can only be seen as suggestive rather than conclusive.

Overall, there were some differences amongst Masters students. EAL students tended to hold less positive perceptions of themselves as writers compared to NES students. They were more likely to have encountered difficulties in referencing correctly and writing with grammatical accuracy. Importantly, EAL students have brought limited experiences of writing particular genres, which could ultimately undermine their academic performance in their new context. These findings will be further discussed in Chapter 11.

# Chapter 6 – Case Study

## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents in detail a case study focusing on one participant's previous writing experience, current writing experience and her perceptions of academic writing and of herself as an academic writer. This approach to presenting the research results aims to reveal the major patterns of findings that will be compared and cross-referenced to other case studies in the following chapters. The chapter delineates the contextual, individual and social factors that contributed to her development as a writer.

Before I introduce the major findings, I will explicate the rationale for exploring this particular case study in-depth. The decision on choosing one-case study format lies mainly with the word limit, as the inclusion of all case studies would result in a very lengthy piece of work. The choice of this specific case study is grounded in several reasons. Firstly, Mary's case study entailed both positive and negative experiences of learning to write. Her learning journey was fraught with tensions and conflicts, but also with successes. Secondly, her accounts were rich in details and simultaneously concise. Then, Mary had attended numerous literacy practices provided by both university and department, so she was able to offer a comprehensive response than students who had attended fewer sessions.

## 6.2 Mary's Profile

Mary was a twenty-three-year-old female student who did her first degree in Psychology. She had some experience of working as a counsellor in a school. After her first degree, Mary enrolled on a two-year Masters programme in her home country. After completing one year, she had been awarded funding for a Masters course in the UK. Mary had studied English at school as part of the curriculum. She took IELTS scoring 7 for speaking, writing and reading and 4 for listening. However, her IELTS scores were not considered when she was awarded the scholarship. Instead she went through a rigorous selection procedure, being interviewed by representatives from the University of Warwick and members of an educational agency from her home country. This suggests that Mary was an academically able student.

### 6.2.1 Prior Writing Experiences

At the beginning of the academic year, Mary reported experiencing a great deal of writing in her previous degrees.

> I had to write a lot and analyse a lot of psychological processes. [...] I do not have to be very creative, because in psychology you have to apply tests and there are some standard results and you interpret them because you have some scores. I had to make a research for every of my course.

This suggests that Mary had previously completed few types of writing. However, such genre as conducting micro-studies and data analyses were fundamental in her current course of study, which could clearly be helpful when completing the course assignments.

Despite her abundant writing experience, Mary revealed that she had received limited provision for writing, explaining that:

> ...in my country it is not important to know to write, we are not so interesting in writing, in fact more on practice.

She also acknowledged that she had not experienced tutor or peer feedback.

> ...in [my country] you don't get this kind of feedback. You only receive a mark. I don't know what 8 should mean – you are very good or things could be better. Teachers don't do that, don't stay and look in my eyes and told that you have done a very good job, you are fabulous.

These extracts indicate that Mary had learnt to write as part of learning her disciplinary knowledge and completing the task assignments. The only support in writing she had received was the face-to-face sessions where a tutor introduced her to the writing conventions specific to taking the admission examinations to her home university.

> I have the exams for my admissions. […] I had to write an essay in three hours. [sessions were about] …steps I should take and how to organise my ideas because she [tutor] knew the system of the marks. She taught me how to write and get a good mark.

Although she had experienced limited support for learning to write, Mary appeared to be confident about her writing skills.

> I think I don't have problems with my writing because for all the subjects I have to write, I received very good marks.

She indicated that she excelled at analytical skills, critical thinking skills and organisational skills. She also displayed intrinsically motivated behaviours and mastery orientation when referring to writing processes.

> [things that motivated me to write] …something coming from inside of you, not someone to force you.[...] And to think that I do for me, not for others. And maybe for this assessment, I want to learn something new, not to get a good mark.

169

According to Mary, the only potential problem with her current writing was her English

language proficiency.

> I am not used to think directly in English. Always I have to translate things because I am always thinking in my own language. And in my language the sentences are very long and I have to translate them automatically in English and it is very, very hard because it is not in the same way in English.

These concerns and issues surrounding student writing in L2 are common for EAL

students, who themselves tend to identify language proficiency (Hyland 2003a) and

previous writing knowledge as their major problem with writing (Grabe 2001).

### 6.2.2 Pre-Orientation Sessions

As part of her scholarship, Mary attended pre-orientation sessions provided by her

funding bodies, which introduced students to the particularities of the British educational

system (e.g. specifics about tutorials, seminars). Students had been advised to engage

actively in learning to write in their new discourse community, as the nature of its

academic writing might be different from their previous educational experiences and

might require different writing strategies and approaches.

### 6.2.3 Academic Writing Class

From the beginning of the WIE Masters course, Mary engaged in a process of

discovering the writing conventions and norms specific to her discourse community.

Thus, Mary alongside Rita attended the academic writing class offered by the

department. This class introduced students to some important writing conventions and

strategies. Both students had mixed feelings about it. On one hand, they appreciated the

value of the taught materials, but on the other hand they believed that it focused on too

many aspects of writing.

> It was too general. [...] Something more precise. Let's talk only about introduction or
> let's talk only about our conclusion. Too much things and too superficial. (Mary)

Besides, Rita criticised the tutor's practice of deploying examples of poor written work,

as she expected to be explicitly presented with excellent samples that would provide

valuable knowledge and skills to be transferred to her assignments. However, their

perceptions of the writing class altered during the year. Throughout interviewing, Mary

referred to writer's knowledge and strategies that she had acquired in that particular

class. For instance, she mentioned that in her first assignment:

> I followed some guidelines [given in the academic writing class] like I had to write
> about introduction, which is …what are my objectives and why did I choose this topic.

When I probed on her perceptions further, she voiced satisfaction with the class.

> It was good, as far as I remember she presented some examples of bad assignments and
> what not to write - that was good. [...] I think it was useful.

Rita also referred on several occasions to the acquired knowledge and reported in the

final interview that this class had contributed to her writing development. Probably, the

negative perceptions were caused by the overwhelming amount and newness of learning

materials received. Besides, they were questioned about their opinions on the class in

their first interview when they had not written any course assignments and had not

applied the acquired knowledge. Accordingly, at that stage the materials seemed

decontextualised and less helpful than during the writing processes.

### 6.2.4 CELTE Support

To improve her academic language skills, Mary attended the in-sessional courses provided by CELTE, which offered language support activities (see chapter 1). She disclosed mixed views on the usefulness of these courses. Initially, Mary expressed her satisfaction with certain sessions that prompted her to reflect on the length of the sentences and paragraphs and encouraged her to closely monitor these conventions when writing.

> It was on an interesting course offered by CELTE, it was about the length of the chapter when you are writing, because I am used to write very, very long sentences and very, very long paragraphs....and this thing is not good. [...] It was useful, now I have to control myself, not to write so much in one sentence.

However, Mary reported that these courses did not always meet her particular needs.

> They are useful in one way but not for me. [...] I wanted to find more about the grammar, I wanted to know more about how to transform something in passive voice or how we do some quotations. And all these courses are about the structure of the essays.

In the last interview when asked to evaluate retrospectively the support offered throughout the academic year, she stated that the CELTE sessions were unhelpful.

> It is no relationship between what they taught us to do and what to write in fact. So, it was unhelpful. [...] They told us not to use very long paragraphs. [...] In fact, it depends on the topic [...] it is not in these academic sessions you learn everything about English way of writing, because it depends if you are doing physics, psychology, chemistry, education.

She considered therefore that a decontextualised approach to teaching the essay structure could not help her to write in her discipline.

As a result of engaging with the in-sessional courses and the academic writing class, Mary indicated early in the academic year that she had acquired important writing conventions that she believed were valued in her discourse community.

172

> What I understood at this point is not very important how you write; it is very important what you write. I don't know this was my impression, because I thought it does matter if I make some grammar mistakes or if my sentences are not very well organised.

This shows that the student engaged actively in interactions with members of the discourse community and the training system to discover what was valued within her discourse community.

## 6.3 Assignment One (MA 1)

The Masters programme required Mary to produce five assignments and a dissertation. Assignment one entailed planning and designing a micro-study, involving a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Over the course of preparing for assignment one, Mary engaged in a complex process of task representation in terms of perceiving the task, assigning goals to the task and employing certain writing strategies. The major interactions Mary engaged with to complete her writing assignments are summarised in table 6.1. The student was introduced to the task requirements through guidelines defined in the module handbook and supplied by the tutor during module sessions. These guidelines clarified the key areas to cover and the core references to read. Mary also referred to the guidelines provided in the academic writing class and in academic literature. She reinterpreted the objectives of the task encompassing her personal, professional and course perspectives. Mary appeared to be adopting a challenge approach to this task, attempting to relate it to her professional interests and motivations.

> I enjoy writing because I really love the topic and I was interested about some time ago. I did some previous research on it. So it was easy for me.

This suggests that the approach of linking the task assignment to personal and professional interests prompted Mary to invest additional efforts and to enjoy the writing

processes.

**Table 6.1 The support provided for writing processes**

| Mary | A1 | A2 | A3 | A4 | A5 | A6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Small group tutorial | + | + | + | _ | _ | _ |
| Individualised tutorial during writing processes | _ | _ | _ | + | _ | + |
| Electronic feedback | + | + | + | + | + | + |
| Individualised tutorial after receiving written feedback | _ | + | + | + | _ | _ |
| Oral presentation | _ | _ | _ | + | _ | _ |
| Writing conference | + | _ | _ | - | _ | _ |
| Use of published guidelines | + | + | + | + | + | + |
| Peer feedback | + | _ | + | + | _ | _ |
| Marks | B | A | B- | B | A | A* |

Mary interacted with members of the discourse community to shape her knowledge

about writing conventions and tutors' expectations for this assignment.

> ...try to keep it simple you know. As someone advised me, they are very good: to keep it simple and to don't get it right, get it written. Don't try to be philosophical or discover some things that anyone else did. Just write something, you should write and you will pass.

She also received advice during a small group tutorial.

> …in the last session I think, when he told me like that it was a micro-research and I am not supposed to do such a big research and such an amount of people.

As part of her module requirements, Mary submitted her outline electronically to the

module tutor. When she had received the feedback, she displayed discontent stating that

174

it indicated:

> Only that your ideas are great, you should follow them, best of luck.

To gain more feedback, Mary engaged in further email exchanges.

> I think at the beginning, it was a misunderstanding because I wanted to do something and he [tutor] understood something completely different and he gave me some advice about my methodology, which was completely different of what I was thinking about. […] It was frustrating – I don't want to do it, I wanted to do something else. I wrote him back. And after 4 or 5 emails […] he finally understood.

This example suggests how electronic feedback may be problematic. Tutors may

misinterpret the messages of the written text and provide inappropriate feedback. In this

instance, Mary displayed persistence in negotiating her task objectives and goals.

Clearly, her knowledgeability about the chosen topic and type of writing sustained her

perseverance with her initial plan.

Tutor-student communication continued after the submission of the assignment

providing Mary with written feedback. Upon receiving her tutor's written feedback,

Mary expressed her disappointment:

> I want to get the real feedback, to took a look at the assignment to see what I did wrong. When I was penalised and where? Why? Because I can make the same mistakes in the second one. […] It was positive like: the methodology is sustained by the research tools or it is well organised, well-written, no mistakes, no bla-bla. It was only positive things.

Mary felt that feedback carried conflicting messages, as it conveyed only positive

comments but it was assigned a B. Accordingly, she believed that there was a mismatch

between written feedback and grade.

> I expected more than B-level after I read it. [...] I think a good feedback should include the positive and negative sides. [...] I think it was not right if I got B, in my feedback [...] he [tutor] only said well, well; but I got B.

175

Another factor that undermined her understanding of the feedback was her

preconceptions of the grading system in the UK.

> B level is like you are not very smart, but you are not very stupid. You are like in the middle way.

When discussing the feedback, Mary exhibited both verbal and non-verbal signals of

frustration and helplessness in learning the writing conventions that would enable her to

achieve excellent results.

> I am frustrated. It is quite frustrating because I did a good job. […] What can I do to get an A here? This is my question. […] I think it is impossible to get an A here. […] I am good at doing a research. I did several research. [...] and still something was not very, very good.

These extracts indicate that assessment practices sometimes confused Mary rather than

helped her to make sense of writing conventions. Besides, she came to hold erroneous

beliefs about what a particular grade meant, indicating that students from certain cultural

backgrounds might believe that a B is a low mark, which can eventually affect their self-

efficacy beliefs.

## 6.4 Assignment Two (MA 2)

Assignment two required to undertake the micro research project detailed in assignment

one and to write an account of it. Mary regarded this assignment task as more difficult

than assignment one explaining that:

> …the first was easier because …I write only what I read from the books, you know. It is quite easy to make a summarise of the information and not to write your own ideas as in the last one. In the second one I have to write only my ideas, and how can I cope with the situation?

She had also encountered difficulties in using particular L2 terminology.

> I don't know …math signs and all the things and to write how your research did go on, and how were the respondents, and how were the responses, and etc. It is quite hard to say it in English.

These quotations suggest that Mary found this particular genre more demanding. She displayed concerns about tasks that required a great deal of explanation and description, as they entailed an advanced L2 proficiency to complete them successfully. Despite her insecurities, Mary was assigned an A for this work.

Mary worked independently when writing this assignment. When asked whether she referred to peers, she expressed her reluctance to turn to them.

> If [...] someone from math will check my assignment - he will have no clue about it. […] If there are some sentences and some meanings they cannot understand and they say that it is not right, the meaning is not okay, you have to rephrase it. But in fact they have no clue about that.

However, she had some parts of her assignment proofread by a friend who was more proficient in English.

Upon receiving the tutor's feedback, Mary reported:

> The first marker wrote something like about I used excellent quantitative data. […] I really know how to use SPSS, because I worked with it several times; so, I am quite an expert. And in my undergraduate I did the Advanced Research methods so I kind of know how to impress someone with quantitative data.

In the light of the comments, she reiterated her concerns about her problem with language fluency.

> I kind of made a lot of grammar mistakes. And I think I will do in the future as well. [...] English is not my native language. So I will never be able to write in English perfectly.

Similarly to her experience of responding to previous written feedback, Mary raised her concerns about the accuracy of the grade.

> I really don't know why I get A for the second one, because for the first one I've worked a lot.

She engaged in a process of discovery the reasons behind her grade, speculating:

> ...you know why I got an A – because I didn't have to write in English so much, you know it was like more standard words like presenting results. I didn't have to be critical whatever ...that's why I got such a good mark. And when I have to write in English, in fact like 20 pages of essay, I did really bad.

When she could not make full sense of the written feedback, Mary provided her own explanations for the writing quality. Consequently, Mary came to hold erroneous conclusions about her capabilities and writing conventions. To clarify the feedback on both assignments, she arranged a tutorial. After this tutorial, she concluded that:

> ...he told me that the first one was a very good B. So I think it was a borderline between the grades and because of the grammar mistakes.

These excerpts reinforce the observation that feedback practices may compromise students' interpretation of the written feedback, which in turn may impact on their perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers.

## 6.5 Assignment Three (MA 3)

For assignment three, the tutor provided students with a list of topics they had to choose from. Mary encountered difficulties in selecting a topic for this assignment.

> ...we had like ten topics and everyone was interesting to me. I wanted to write something for each topic, but not the topic in the whole meaning. [...] And I changed my mind several times. Finally I decided to write the most easier one.

When interpreting the objectives of the tasks, Mary decided to contextualise her writing in her native educational system for various reasons. Firstly, her familiarity with her native educational system would facilitate the writing processes. Secondly, she thought that the other topics would require extensive reading and critical analysis of materials,

whereas she had limited time to spend on these practices. Thirdly, she exhibited interest in analysing and expressing her own opinions on the selected topic. Next, Mary discussed the topic choice with a friend who supported her option. Finally, she hoped that the tutor would be interested in learning about the approaches to the topic in her native country.

Over the course of preparation for and writing the assignment, Mary carefully considered the reader when writing about an educational system that s/he might not be familiar with, presenting important background for facilitating markers' understanding.

> In the section …it was about the communist system, it was like an introduction for X [name of tutor] or whoever will read to know that's why we are here and not in another point. That's why we are such short-minded and that's why we are not developed in this field.

She claimed her positions based mostly on her own experience as a practitioner, taking a personal approach to what she wrote.

> ...everything I wrote is based on my experience as being a counsellor in school and I couldn't find so much literature to argue and support my affirmations. And that's why I am feeling quite stressed because I didn't find something to support what I wrote and I think this will be quite a problem for me.

Thus, she adopted a knowledge-telling approach to writing of what she knew and had experienced (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987). Mary was aware that this approach could be problematic, as her arguments were not supported by evidence. Besides, she found it difficult to be objective. Despite this, she indicated that she enjoyed writing because it was a way of making her viewpoints known.

> I enjoyed writing it. [...] because you can have lots of opinions but no one will pay attention to them. Now, it is an opportunity for me: someone to really read something I've written.

Clearly, Mary tried to engage with the course through her personal experiences rather than replicating the academic texts and conceding to the authority of course materials.

During writing processes, Mary electronically sent the assignment outline to the tutor.

> I sent him 5 pages if I can remember, it was exactly all the chapters, all the information, etc. and he replied 'wow, it makes sense, go on. Look forward to read it' [...] He noticed grammar mistakes, but he didn't tell me anything about the structure.

She expressed dismay at receiving vague comments, while the written feedback on the final version indicated a series of weaknesses and issues.

> He [tutor] analysed every chapter and some short comments, like 10 chapters and he commented on each. And I think neither of them was okay. I couldn't find one sentence saying 'Okay, I like this idea and it was okay".

When asked why her mark had gone down, Mary believed that the key factor was the superficial and misleading interventions she received during the writing process.

As on previous occasions, Mary did not seek peers' help as she exhibited reservations about this type of support:

> I am afraid to receive feedback from others. [A friend] told me 'send your assignment and I will look over it' and I don't know why - I don't want to do it. [...] I am not used to send my friends my assignments.

However after assignment submission, Mary happened to discuss the assignment task with a colleague.

> ...one of my friends told me - when you have to write something critical you have to compare with what you have to write with what is in England or UK, or other parts of the country, but I have not done it.

This chance allowed Mary to learn an important strategy for presenting her materials critically, suggesting the potential of peer support to develop student writing.

Upon analysing the tutor's written feedback, she mentioned the following:

> I didn't succeed to be very critical. I offered only like a general overview: I talked about development and decrease in the same time. So, the reader ended by being confused.

She reported that the tutor's feedback focused not only on content but also on

grammatical errors.

> He corrected a lot of words in English I used for my last assignment, but they were okay for my last assignment... but for this one he tried to correct every word I used in English.

Mary also mentioned that the marker criticised her for having employed "depressive

literature".

> He said I used 'depressive literature'. [...] I've never heard about these two words put together. They mean literature sounded depressing, because what I said about my country's educational system. [...] I spoke about development, about decrease, and a lot of things working not very good in the same time.

Mary believed that the markers were confused and that might have been caused by their

unfamiliarity with her educational system.

> ...I think the point is that you know X [name of tutor] and the second marker did not live in our system and it is barely impossible for him to understand our concept. [...] they didn't quite understand it.

Besides, she conceded that her language proficiency might have affected the clarity of

her arguments.

> I think it was my fault because I didn't manage to write in English, to explain very well this aspect.

Mary disagreed on the majority of comments and on the assigned grade (B-). She

arranged a meeting to discuss the feedback and the possibility of resubmission. The tutor

explained that she had failed to present a persuasively argued assignment; whereas,

Mary strongly believed that the problem lay with the assignment topic rather than the

quality of the arguments.

> The topic was a problem and if you ask me to do it again I am sure I cannot do it better. I will make the same mistakes.

This quotation indicates that despite the number of interactions she engaged with to

clarify the feedback, her beliefs about particular writing conventions were not

challenged. Having read the feedback, Mary concluded:

> ...when we are choosing topics from our systems, from our countries, they [tutors] don't understand it exactly and you have to have a very good English and explain it very well.

As a result of her experiences, Mary concluded that there was a variation in writing

conventions amongst tutors that confused her.

> I am very confused because I heard a lot of versions like someone told me that I have to make long paragraphs, and academic ones. Now [...] another told me that paragraph should be short, clear and very explicit and you know I don't really know how to write anymore.

Besides, she argued that she was unable so far to gauge what it meant to be critical in her

tutors' eyes.

> I cannot be critical. I don't know how to be critical. I don't know what 'critical' means.

She also reported that the grades lowered considerably her perceptions of herself as a

writer and her academic expectations.

> Now I am expecting anything to happen. I don't have big expectations now.

Despite strong disapproval of her tutor's grade and comments, Mary devised an action

plan for her next assignments. She enacted self-regulative approaches to guiding her

efforts to attain better achievements.

> When I got my result, I was thinking - Oh! My god! I don't really know how to write in English so I have to do something, to work harder. So I start to make some notes about what kind of words sound better than others. [...] I started to read about how to say something critical.

As a result of these experiences, Mary clearly experienced changes in her views on academic writing, self-efficacy beliefs and writing behaviours.

## 6.6 Assignment Four (MA 4)

For this task, Mary negotiated the topic based on her personal, professional and educational perspectives. She had set her own achievement goals for the assignment, suggesting that she adopted a performance goal approach (Timperley & Parr 2009). Indeed, Mary appeared to be concerned mostly with demonstration of competence and protection of her self-worth.

> ...I hope I will not get the same result because trust me, honestly if I get less than 60% for my assignment, it means I am really stupid, because this is my topic which I am interested in.

During the writing process, Mary displayed low self-efficacy beliefs and apprehension about writing:

> My academic writing is getting worse, you know. The normal thing the people improve from one assignment to another, but it looks it is not the case. For this one I should get a C in this case. [...] wow and now my boundaries are so low, low, low. Now I want a C.

Despite showing a performance goal orientation, Mary invested considerable effort in writing this assignment. She brought her prior knowledge and experiences, her own perspectives and interpretations of academic texts to writing, adopting therefore the challenge approach (Lea 1998). She also engaged in an active process of discovery of what her assignment entailed. She referred to her tutor and literature on academic writing, reporting:

183

> I have the same problem with this assignment because I asked X [name of tutor]: assignment is basically a literature review and I don't know if literature review involves being critical or only what others wrote.

She submitted the entire draft to the tutor who provided her with detailed feedback, focusing on both form and content. The tutor also supplied her with advice on how she could engage critically with materials.

> ...she gave me some feedback you know like 'don't try to read everything it was written in this field, try to read half of it and try to be more profound'. I was trying to say that X said, Y said, Z said bla-bla-bla. 'And try to give more details about the research'.

During module sessions, the tutor allocated a session where students presented their assignments and received peer and tutor feedback. Yet, Mary reported that most communication happened between writers and tutors. Peers engaged less in this dialogue, asking questions about the terms and the background to the subject, suggesting their unfamiliarity with the topic. Nevertheless, Mary acknowledged that one student's questions prompted her to reflect on a particular aspect of her work.

> She asked me something ...and in fact I did follow her suggestion. She asked me - basically it is impossible to find children only with ADHD and without other common behaviour disorders and how can you study self-esteem without interfering with other common behaviour disorders?

Upon receiving the tutor's written feedback, Mary explained:

> She [tutor] highlighted everything: like I forgot to put the brackets, forgot put the page number, or forgot to put a date here or something else. [...] She corrected everything.

Feedback indicated her key weaknesses:

> It was only two comments like: I have forgot to write about [particular aspect of the topic]. And the second one was [...] I have tried to cover too much ground and I should have focused more on specific issues.

Mary exhibited frustration about the tutor's failure to advise her on these aspects. During

the writing processes, she submitted electronically the whole draft and expected the tutor

to provide detailed feedback that would indicate every weakness.

> I think it is not very fair because, you know, I asked [name of tutor] several times about
> my outline and she could have said that before I submitted my assignment. Like to say
> you can write about this as well.

This shows that students had great expectations of the specificity of tutors' feedback.

Next, she commented:

> The final words were like - this is an excellent piece of work, but I still got 69%, in fact.
> [...] And she wrote like my English was perfect and I didn't make grammar mistakes.

She also challenged some in-text comments regarding the usage of personal pronouns 'I'

and 'we':

> I read like the corrections she made in my assignment like word order and somewhere I
> wrote like 'we should ask ourselves' and she wrote like 'I' like instead of 'we', she put I
> and I am not sure why. You can't use like 'I'.

She argued:

> ...you know 'I' ...is not very academical to use 'I'. 'We' is not as well but if I have to
> choose between 'we' and 'I', I will definitely choose 'we'.

However, she concluded that tutors' opinions on the use of 'I' varied across modules and

students needed to check this before starting to write:

> ... before I submit the assignment I used to ask them [tutors] 'Can I write with Passive
> voice?' and I forgot completely to ask X about it, because every teacher has different
> opinions.

In the light of this feedback, Mary changed her belief about the role of language

proficiency in writing:

> ...last time I told you English is my biggest problem. Now I started to think that English is not one of my biggest problem, because the last feedback was okay at this point. […] Because now with all these programs using Word, and using all the corrections, dictionaries online.

Mary arranged a meeting with the tutor to discuss the feedback and to receive further clarification.

> [I went] because I am not satisfied with the grade. And I want to know where I went wrong or what went wrong on this specific assignment.

Mary often approached tutors to better understand written feedback, revealing that assessment language was not always transparent and personal interactions with tutors were crucial to deepen her understanding of feedback. Mary detailed this meeting:

> ...she told me you don't have to be disappointed, bla-bla-bla. It was a good mark. It is quite okay. So because English is not your native language, of course, you cannot get more than 60 or something she told me like that.

However, such encounters did not always provide enough clarifications, which engendered erroneous beliefs about academic writing. In this case, Mary concluded that EAL students were not in the best position to attain high grades due to their linguistic differences. Additionally, she was still confused with some of the comments:

> ….how can I write without trying to cover so much ground, I don't know, how can I be more focussed? [...] I am so confused I don't know how to change it. [...] but I don't know how to summarise all the information and I have to speak to her, I don't know what actions to take.

Clearly, Mary displayed helplessness about learning the writing conventions and selecting the right strategies to improve further. Consequently, she commented:

> ...now I am not so motivated, honestly, I am not so motivated at all. [...] There is no point to stress myself for nothing. And I am sure I will get a B even if I work ten times harder or if I will not. Because my level is B, is not less than a B even if I don't pay too much effort. This is my level you know and no one will give me less than 65% because I know how to write in English and I am not so stupid. I will get a B even if I work or even if I don't work. What is the point stressing myself without any reason?

This shows that Mary was confident about securing B grades, but she struggled to understand how to attain A grades. Feedback practices did not enable her to feed forward in writing processes; in fact, they lowered her self-efficacy beliefs and compromised her views on academic writing.

> I am not a native-speaker, I have to be happy with B, because it is quite hard to pass so everyone told me it is very important to get a C here, because you don't speak the same language, even if I know…I have a whole baggage of information. [...] Basically, this is where I stand. I am not the smarter one I am not the stupid one. I am somewhere in-between.

Therefore, feedback practices can be powerful tools for student learning (Hyland & Hyland 2006a), but also can have debilitating effects on students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers (Bandura 1986).

## 6.7 Assignment Five (MA 5)

For assignment five, Mary was assigned the topic. She commented in this regard:

> ...the topic was very huge like 5 or 6 lines and she told me 'critically discuss the construction of [topic]. [...] there are many aspects. And I made subchapter for each – like to be very obvious that I've approached this subject.

She expressed some reservations about this approach to writing titles.

> ... you don't know what they thought about when they write the name of the topic. I just think what does it mean, and ....I don't know. You know we have to analyse every word and request what they want to write about.

Mary found it more difficult to understand the topic and identify conventions for producing excellent work. She responded by rephrasing the original texts and using particular terminology to indicate that she had acquired the disciplinary knowledge. Therefore, she appeared to adopt the reformulation approach (Lea 1998).

> I didn't contribute with anything in this last assignment and in the other ones I used my own ideas, I developed some kind of models, some kind of intervention.

Over the course of preparing for and writing this assignment, Mary worked individually, referring neither to her tutor nor to her peers. It might have happened because of her workload and time pressure. Additionally, she was the only student to choose this assignment. The other students did not need to submit an assignment for this module.

Upon receiving the tutors' written feedback, Mary stated:

> ... the feedback was kind of strange because I told you I got a good mark, but the feedback wasn't like you've done an excellent work, it is amazing. The feedback was short like half page, I think. And she told me that in general I approached very good the topic, I wrote about all the important elements but she was wondering about the fact that I didn't explain some stuff very well.

As in previous cases, Mary indicated that the feedback was short and contradictory and constituted a source of puzzlement. Again, she believed that there was a mismatch between tutor's comments and the grade. She advanced some potential explanations for this discrepancy:

> ...I think I got a good mark because I didn't use too much literature. [...] I used five research and she told me that I didn't engage critically in them. [...] But because I didn't use too many articles this wasn't very obvious.

Mary also believed that:

> Maybe it was like an encouragement, I don't know. [...] Maybe she thought, you know, "Poor Mary, she has done all her assignments with me and the dissertation and everything with me. Let's give her an A, at least for this one".

When I asked whether it was possible that the tutor preferred a simple style of writing, she replied:

> We have different mentality about writing, different conceptions and I will not change mine because I got 60% on [assignment three], I will not change my way of

> writing....even if I will fail. [...] I don't like to write like stupid stuff. [...] everyone could write simple stuff. I am a professional, am I? I have to write more complex, I don't know ....from my point of view – you don't have to understand what I am writing because you are not in my field. [...] This one was made like for stupid people, like everyone can understand. It was not very complex, it wasn't very original.

Clearly, Mary underwent painful and distressing experiences when learning the dominant values of her discourse community. She believed that to become successful she needed to become a different sort of writer that contradicted her sense of herself as a writer.

> It is kind of frustration, you know. Because I got good mark for something 'copied – pasted'. And I got a really bad mark when I tried to be original, say my point of view and whatever. This is my frustration because they assume we are stupid and you cannot bring something new to the field. [...] I feel like I'm a robot programmed to write something. [...] I cannot go deeper, I cannot go further, I cannot go back, I cannot go anywhere, just follow some standards.

This recounts the struggles and tensions Mary underwent when she learnt that tutors praised her for using the reformulation approach and criticised instances when she employed the challenge approach. It followed that tutors regarded her knowledge as academically unworthy. Further, she argued that there was a discrepancy between how tutors and she interpreted the concept of "originality".

> ...from their point of view, the originality is [...] about structure. This might be an original thing as well. But if you want to criticize someone you cannot criticise it with your own ideas. You have to criticise something using others' opinions. From my point of view, this is not original. It can be original because you found them. [...] To be original it is to read one article and say your own opinion about it without finding support or whatever, finding ten authors saying the same or ten who didn't find the same.

Such clashes between expectations and values often engendered crises of confidence and of identity among students. Furthermore, Mary reconceptualised the concept of academic writing arguing that:

> ... what I understood from this year – you should rephrase what others said and make a good structure but not ...you don't have to be very original. You have to ....if you want to say one phrase, like your own idea, you have to find someone else who did the same thing and support your ideas. If you have one idea and no one else wrote about it, you cannot include because you don't have someone else to support it. [...] I don't know it might be only my point of view but I think the originality is very, very banished here.

Mary also challenged the belief that students needed to possess advanced L2 proficiency to succeed academically:

> ...you don't have to know English very well to get an A for the assignment. Trust me. [...] And you know why – because when you write an assignment you have to rephrase some stuff, you don't need to be so good in English.

Instead, she thought that students were expected to paraphrase academic texts and to use particular terminology to answer the question, which did not require advanced L2 competence.

Despite her crises of identity and of confidence, Mary believed she had improved her writing skills:

> I've learnt like when you have to be critical you have to make like obvious that you are critical, because I used 'advantages' subchapters, subheadings; 'disadvantages' subchapters. I delimited the stuff very well to everyone to see what I meant.

Consequently, Mary's writing experiences were fraught with tensions and conflicts that caused her to experience changing identities and shifting beliefs about academic writing.

## 6.8 Writing up the Dissertation

Her final task was writing up the dissertation. Mary engaged in numerous stages to conduct a study, analyse the data and report on it. She interacted continuously with her supervisor to receive recommendations on improving the written text. Mary submitted

the dissertation draft electronically. When receiving feedback, she indicated that the

supervisor provided detailed comments. However, she resented particular comments.

> She told me you should seriously – 'Mary', she even wrote my name 'you should
> definitely consider to rewrite discussion part because you messed up the discussion and
> results. [...] But it wasn't like what I wrote it was bad you know, it was only because I
> didn't follow the rules. So, basically it is the same thing as in the assignments parts. If
> you don't follow the right rules you consider the risk of failing. But why? Are these
> rules generally-agreed or is this a Bible?

Mary believed that the discourse community enforced particular conventions and

criteria, the rejection of which could result in failure. She held conflicting desires to

preserve her identity and to attain high performance. Mary failed to recognise that

particular conventions aimed to induct her into the privileged discourses of her

community. Instead, she referred to academic conventions inscribed in other academic

contexts:

> I read the American psychologist association guideline, like all the research are
> constructed, guided by this American guideline, like they follow all these rules. [...] I
> wrote chapters as in the American Psychology, whatever and she made such a great deal
> of it.

Mary also displayed frustration at her supervisor's failure to explain the reasons behind

her recommendations.

> ...when they have to give such a small explanation for the requirements, they don't do it.
> Because 'okay, why do I have to change it? Why?' Because if she explains me why
> maybe I will agree 'yes, I was stupid! I will change it'. But now I feel like I've changed
> stuff because only she told me to do. I don't have particular explanations. I've done it
> like some robot programmed. [...] I've tried to find some explanations for myself to, to
> explain myself like in my own mind. Why do I have? Let's think what I've done wrong.

This account fraught with questions and emotive language suggests her need to

understand the writing conventions, so she could internalise them and accordingly

modify her self-regulating behaviours. It follows that she wanted desperately to become

an active agent of her own learning rather than following recommendations blindly.

Besides, she disagreed on another comment:

> She [supervisor] told me that in the results part I should include only numbers [results] and in the discussion part to find writers who support my point of view, to find writers who don't support my point of view and to find writers to give some explanations for my results. How stupid that can be! To find someone else to explain my results. So, this was one change – so I completely raised my point of view.

Further, she contended:

> The second one was about ethical issues. She told me I should include the ethical issues in the methodology part. And I was used to include the ethical issues at the end of the last chapter of my dissertation.

She also indicated that this format was acceptable in her previous module, suggesting an

inconsistency amongst tutors:

> And what was surprisingly, for X assignment with 'the micro-research' I included the ethical issues in the last part, it was like the ethical issues and conclusions and he [tutor] said 'very good".

Despite her disagreements on some comments, Mary found other comments helpful. For

instance, she mentioned:

> It was helpful to help me to structure it more okay. It is not about the content; it is more about the structure. If you ask me about she helped me to find the appropriate structure of my dissertation, yes, she definitely did.

In the last interview, Mary reported on the value of supervisor's interventions during

writing-up the dissertation:

> She helped me to structure better and organize my ideas because I used to write so many complicated stuff and keep it simple, a bit simpler and structure stuff, I don't know. She gave me many feedback.

## 6.9 Final Comments

In the final interview, Mary reported that she perceived the course and the process of learning to write easier than she expected. She revealed that many sessions distorted the concept of writing specific to her discourse community, which resulted in episodes of despair and frustration.

> ...they meant this academic writing looks like something untouchable. [...] They all scared us 'academic writing ... English people have a such a special way to write'. [...] They made these courses to sound too difficult. I am talking about [the departmental], from Istanbul [part of the funding programme], one organized by CELTE. [...] They talked about academic writing as being something like a science fiction.

Clearly, Mary underwent dramatic changes in her perceptions and skills during the year. She believed that the following factors contributed to her learning to write in her discourse community:

- Reading exemplification materials uploaded on the WIE site.

- Reading articles and other research.

- Formative interventions.

- Interactions with personal tutor.

- Library databases and journals.

- Written feedback on assignments.

- Grades as indications of meeting assessment criteria and impetus to devising

  action plans for writing development.

- Friend's proofreading.

- The reflection prompted by my research interviews.

> Your research was very, very interesting and helped me to think more about stuff, I am serious. It was like when you asked me something, you know, I had to think about my own process of writing and it was very helpful.

A range of individual, social and contextual factors therefore came to influence Mary's

writing experience, represented graphically in Figure 6.1.

**Individual factors**

Motivation
Work experience
Self-regulatory skills
English proficiency
Prior self-efficacy beliefs
Prior writing experiences
Preconceptions of grading system
Prior perceptions of academic
writing
Academic expectations, goals and
interests
Disciplinary knowledge
Writing skills
Reading skills

**Mary**

**Social factors**

Grades

Small group tutorials
Oral presentations
One-to-one tutorials
Electronic feedback
Peer feedback
Written Feedback
Research interviews
Reader

Guidelines
Module sessions
Tutors' views on academic writing
Privileged conventions
Tutors' preferences for assessment criteria
Exemplification materials
Writing assignments
Library resources
Academic writing class
CELTE in-sessional courses

**Contextual factors**

**Figure 6.1 Factors that influenced Mary's writing experience.**

Mary also reported building special bonds with her tutors during the course:

> The teachers were all nice and friendly. They were like big fathers. [...] The quality of
> relations between teachers and students is really great here. [...] So you feel proud be a
> student here.

This indicates that Mary valued the relationships with tutors that helped her to feel at

ease in her discourse community. Overall, Mary suggested that the department provided

enough support and opportunities to learn to write. The only suggestion was to run a

session on the UK marking system for EAL students.

> ...for someone else who got 60%, if you translate in your marks in your system of
> education… and in my country it is 6, it is like really bad, you know. And here it is quite
> okay, you know. B is a very good mark for an international student, so maybe this kind
> of presentation of the marks may be…would help students. Not to feel so down if they
> got a C or a B.

As a result of these interactions, Mary reported developing as an academic writer. She

noted to have acquired writing strategies:

> ...keep it simple. Don't get it right, get it written. So, I have like 2 mottos. I'm serious
> 'keep it simple' it is like I will write on my face. Don't complicate your life for nothing.
> [laughing] And don't waste too much time reading too much stuff because you will get
> lost and you will have like the tendency to write more and more and more complicated.
> [...] Try to be selective when reading and read only the relevant things. Try to make a
> simpler structure and think if someone else will read and if they don't have your
> background they have still to understand it.

Mary improved some writing skills:

> I think I improved in thinking critically and writing critically. I think because this was
> the first time I wrote in this manner. So maybe this is the issue where I improved.

She also acquired L2 knowledge:

> ....I don't translate the words in my mind into English as before. Now, it feels more
> natural. In the first beginning, I remember I used to make notes in [native language] and
> try to translate word-by-word. I don't do this anymore. I can't say that I think in English,
> but at least it is somewhere more than 50%, I am able to write very fast and to use nice
> words.

In describing herself as an academic writer, she indicated that:

> [I am] average [giggling]. I think I was below average honestly. And now I am
> definitely average.

> I think I'm….if in September let say on Likert scale I was on one, now I am on three. So
> the improvement is not so obvious since I got here.

In terms of disciplinary knowledge, Mary reported learning nothing new during the module sessions. Yet, she reported being knowledgeable about the content from her previous educational degrees.

Mary described her learning experience as rich in social and personal achievements rather than in academic attainments:

> ...it was a great experience for me [...] in terms of social activities, not like the academic modules. In terms of meeting people and relating to stuff, be more confident and smiling to people in the street, speaking English, finding how to deal with other culture.

Comparing with previous interviews, Mary expressed surprising changes in her perceptions of her experience in British academia. She expressed satisfaction with the majority of literacy practices compared to her previous accounts that disclosed frustration, anger and disappointment. She showed gratitude for the amount of provision and tutor-student relationships. This change in her perceptions may have occurred because of the relief of successfully completing the course and assignments. Besides, she had had some time to reflect retrospectively on her learning experiences, concluding that she developed as a writer and managed to conduct successfully a study that she was interested in. Further, Mary brought high self-efficacy beliefs as a learner to the current course that could have shielded her from the negative effects of the deep affective states on her perceptions of academic writing and of herself as a writer. At the end of the year, Mary was thus less critical about the confusion and frustration she had experienced during the course and expressed overall satisfaction with her academic performance.

**6.10 Conclusions**

The aim of this chapter was to identify the issues surrounding writing of an EAL student. Mary's case study gave an insight into the sorts of experiences, interactions, literacy practices, tensions, contradictions, affective states, crises of identity and confidence that one student underwent during the year. Findings illustrated that the student acquired the writing conventions and norms through a range of institutional practices and interactions. More specifically, Mary engaged in interactions with members of the discourse community, with institutional artefacts and with the training system to learn to write. However, these encounters were fraught with tensions, struggles and contradictions that had an impact on the construction of writing knowledge and of her self-efficacy beliefs as a writer.

The analysis of this case study raised some important questions regarding student writing. Findings revealed that a student's previous writing experiences, self-efficacy beliefs as an academic writer and views on academic writing had some effects on how she participated in the literacy practices and completed her assignments. This observation is corroborated by a number of empirical studies (Biggs 1987, 2003; Ramsden 1992; Prosser & Trigwell 1999) that showed that students' characteristics that they bring to their learning experiences relate to the quality of their outcomes.

Findings suggested that there were discrepancies between the student and tutors' views and expectations that engendered tensions. Mary revealed that what seemed to be an appropriate writing assignment for one tutor could be found inappropriate for another. As a result, she had to learn writing conventions specific to each assignment. Crucially,

she believed that departmental standards and tutors' expectations constrained her from

expressing her own views and being original.

Another question raised by the analysis of the case study was the quality of the

assessment practices. Whilst effective feedback empowered the student to learn the

dominant discourses, less effective practices often confused her and deprived her from

opportunities to become an active agent of her own learning. Mary's struggle to

understand the feedback and to respond appropriately indicates that she was unfamiliar

with the assessment language and that was not explicit enough. Consequently, she

sometimes formed erroneous beliefs about writing and her writing competence.

Importantly, findings revealed a downward change in her perceptions of herself as an

academic writer. At the end, she rated herself as an average writer, while at the

beginning of the programme, she indicated to be a good one. In the next chapters, I will

compare and cross-reference these findings to other four case studies.

# Chapter 7 – Interactions with Members of the Discourse Community

## 7.1 Introduction

In Chapter 6, I described the writing experiences of one EAL student and identified several themes that will be compared and cross-referenced across the four case studies. This chapter focuses primarily on EAL students' interactions with members of their discourse community. These interactions occurred in various formats such as face-to-face tutorials, group tutorials, oral presentations, electronic feedback and written feedback. I first detail the student-tutor communication that occurred during tutorials and oral presentations. Then, the chapter explores tutor-student communication via electronic means. Next, it addresses the interactions through written feedback and concludes with the peer interactions. A summary of the literacy practices students engaged with while completing writing assignments is included in Appendixes 7.1 – 7.4.

## 7.2 Tutorials

As part of the course, all five students experienced tutorials where tutors introduced the task requirements and writing conventions and students raised issues regarding their written work. Four out of five participants were positive about these types of

interactions, reporting to have derived benefits from them. For instance, students

indicated that tutorials helped them to clarify the task assignments.

> ...professor [...] give us an hour to ask questions. I don't know what does it mean? Can I do that? Can I do this? That was a lot more helpful. [...] Actually it was him who stressed a few times [a particular requirement]. And I said okay, that is very important. (Molly)

Next, tutor-student communication was viewed as a platform for learning writing

conventions common to their discourse community.

> I understand that why we call it academic performance. You have to perform it. You have to show what you learnt from the module. [...] To show the knowledge of the course and we have to put the module as a strong background. (Rita)

Students reported that some tutors discussed students' writing processes and monitored

their writing progress during tutorials.

> I think it [tutorial] is very instructive and inspiring for me, because to discuss how to write, I think it is a key problem for us. So because we have the opportunity to discuss it, it makes us feel… keep paces with time or… keep keen on the progress of our writing. [...] the tutor gives you feedback immediately, so it is like on-spot coaching. (Rita)

Students received oral feedback that indicated their strengths and weaknesses, helping

them to construct a revision plan.

> She [tutor] advised me 'okay, this is good thing, but make sure others' references and others' written points in the hand-outs that she gave us, we should make use of it. [...] The one-to-one was really, really helpful and it is good when you present what you want to write. She said 'okay, this is what you presenting, why not do like this, do like that, this and that, instead of this have that. And then she referred me some of the reading list. (Oliver)

Further, tutor-student communication enabled students to learn new writing strategies.

> He [tutor] told us not to get right, but get it down. So every time you have idea you would better try to get them down. [...] And you'd better keep your reference list handy. [...] So you don't need to leave all the work to pile like the mountain. (Rita)

Tutors also employed these interactions to debrief students on their academic performance and grades.

> ...he tried to explain the marking process. […] he said that for those who didn't do well actually it was argument that was a mistake, either you are too narrow that is what he said or you are too broad. […] Actually he talked about overwriting problem and also grammatical thing. (Molly)

Students valued greatly when tutors presented models of good work during tutorials.

> ...we read an essay from the previous years, first we commented why it went well and what should we learn from it. […] Going back to that discussion; first, we learnt we have to use subheadings and use them well, organise the whole thing and […] you need really be specific about your point. (Molly)

These interactions also enabled participants to identify the gaps in their disciplinary knowledge. For instance, after Hannah arranged a face-to-face tutorial to discuss a failed assignment, she noted:

> You know, at first I think maybe this [area of study] is concerned about …teacher to control the whole class, but when I talk with my tutor: he said 'no, it is about the whole school'.

As a result, she was able to revise her assignment and improve its overall quality. The ongoing communication enabled students to build relationships of collegiality with tutors. They believed that the module tutors were kind and helpful, which enabled them to feel at ease in their discourse community.

> ...the tutors' behaviour towards us, to students is ....affective, affect me. […] Some international students, they have different background or they have different behaviour, maybe some British people doesn't…. don't like us, especially Chinese students. [...] Teachers, they all nice. [...] I don't know but I feel in their eyes [it does not matter] where you come from, it is just you and other students. (Hannah)

This shows that EAL students valued enormously the friendly relationships with tutors, which enhanced their sense of confidence. Furthermore, tutors provided efficacy

information on students' writing, which in turn influenced their perceptions of themselves as academic writers. Thus, the interviews revealed a strong emphasis amongst the participants on the importance of formative interventions during writing processes. Clearly, the excerpts were saturated with positive and thankful comments on the value of tutor-student interactions.

### 7.2.1 Shortcomings of Tutor-Student Communication

Despite students' positive views on the role of tutorials in their learning, participants did not always benefit from them. A number of issues that compromised their success have been delineated. For instance, Hannah was less positive about these encounters, as she did not like to communicate with tutors considering them as authority figures whom she could not approach easily.

> I always don't like to speak with tutors. [....] I don't know why, for me teachers are always different....different world. If I think 'Oh! I will talk to teacher, I will speak to a tutor' – I will feel ....headache.

Hannah attributed her reluctance to interact with tutors to cultural differences.

> That is maybe the problem for all Chinese students. [...] We all like that, because in our teachers are all serious...and one teacher had to care about a lot of students in whole class, so they don't have any more time to take one by one. And you don't need to communicate with teachers – just teachers say something and you do something.

However, this belief was not consistent with the two other East Asian students' behaviours. Both Molly and Rita often approached tutors for support and advice. Hannah's hostility might be explained by her poor interpersonal skills at participating in these encounters and at using this experience for feed forward purposes in subsequent writing. Paradoxically, Hannah revealed that most tutors were kind and helpful. She was

fascinated by their attitudes towards EAL students and their ongoing help regarding

academic and non-academic matters. Nevertheless, these perceptions did not help her to

overcome the interactional blocks.

> Although he is very nice but I still feel stressed. I don't know why I feel stressed. I just want to finish the tutorial. I want to finish tutorial earlier. I want to go, I want to go, really, it is strange but it is reality for me.

The timing of interactions emerged as critical to their efficacy. Two students perceived

that on several occasions tutorials came at a late stage in their writing process, leaving

too little time for further revisions in the light of tutors' advice.

> I think we had two tutorials – one or two – which was a bit late. We had tutorials when we just have one week to submit the assignments. What is that? That's not really fair on people. (Oliver)

> In fact, at that moment [of attending tutorial] my second assignment is carrying out and we just discussed how to carry it out. But I think I have got some ideas for my assignment. (Rita)

They acknowledged that it was particularly challenging to revise when tutors provided

them with numerous suggestions that required thorough revision. Sometimes, they did

not manage to implement all recommendations and/or to proofread their texts, which

eventually did not lead to substantial improvement.

Another student found that tutorials had occurred too early in her writing preparation.

Hannah acknowledged that she tended not to participate in tutorials because either she

had not decided on the topic or had not done enough reading around the chosen topic.

> We had one class only about the assignment […] after the class the teacher said we can stay in the classroom and ask him some questions ….if you have an idea of your topic - you can stay in the class and discuss with him. But at that time, I don't have any ideas of my assignment, so I didn't stay in the classroom. (Hannah)

The analysis suggested that a prerequisite for successful tutor-student encounters was

submission of students' drafts prior to the meeting. On occasions when tutors were

familiar with the content of written work and students knew what they intended to write

about, these encounters became more focused and productive for all participants.

> I did go to one of [particular module] tutorial too, but I think it was brief maybe because I haven't written something and I didn't really go there with my materials. (Oliver)

Furthermore, several participants indicated that it would be helpful if students set an

agenda before meeting their tutors.

> It is better if you have your own questions. I mean indeed ask specific questions when you meet your supervisor, you can just go directly to your own specific questions on writing. So it will make both you and tutor much clear on the tutorial. (Rita)

Besides, all participants indicated that the nature of oral feedback sometimes generated

confusion and frustration among students. Students struggled to make sense of the

feedback that did not explain the reasons behind particular changes to their assignments.

> ...some of them give me reasons why to change to this way, but some of them just follow their own academic thoughts. So I would like them to tell me the reasons for the distinctive change. (Rita)

Further, all students occasionally encountered difficulties in deciding on the correct

revising strategy. For instance, during face-to-face tutorial Oliver was strongly advised

to use the reading list and content covered in the class when revising his written work.

However, the written feedback provided by the same tutor on the same assignment

revealed that he failed to present his personal position on the topic.

> There were places in the assignment where you were too reliant on sources and your own voice failed to come through strongly enough. (Feedback sheet, OA5)

It seems that Oliver focused exclusively on tutor's comments, failing to achieve an

appropriate balance between academic content and personal commentary.

Another potential problem with conducting tutorials was the type of language used to provide comments. Thus, Rita failed an assignment despite the extended support she had received during the writing process. She had two one-to-one tutorials and an oral presentation about her assignment (see Appendix 7.1). However, Rita failed to employ her tutor's suggestions as she misinterpreted their intent, perceiving them not directive enough to reshape her writing objectives.

> I still think she [tutor] didn't point out what I should do and what she is looking for. Maybe I misunderstood her idea and she wasn't very clear with my idea (RA 5).

Besides, three participants occasionally disapproved the oral feedback, as it carried values and requirements contradictory to theirs.

> ...when we discussed why I failed, she told me what she is looking for ...the title, then the subtitle. [...] And then questioning, all those kinds of terminology and beneath the terminology my reference ...I mean the literature review with reference and with my own reflection, so I also got very shocked with her idea. I think it is a secondary school paper. [...] I think because we are research postgraduate, we don't need to ....make our work so fixed. [...] I mean if you always try to meet the tutor's taste is not a supportive approach to be innovative and creative. (Rita)

This suggests that the student had contradictory views on good writing work, struggling to accommodate the privileged conventions in her writing.

Evidence showed that tutorials entailed complex dynamics that provided students with important benefits, but also posed challenges. Tutorials constituted an important means of clarifying the task requirements, writing conventions and tutors' expectations. However, students occasionally failed to benefit from them. Such factors as untimely feedback, the nature of feedback, the type of language to provide it and students' individual differences sometimes compromised the success of tutorials. Consequently,

they were less likely to participate actively in these encounters and to revise adequately

in the light of tutor oral feedback.

## 7.3 Oral Presentations

Oral presentations offered students opportunities to present their written work and to

receive feedback from tutors and other students. On at least one occasion, four out of

five students presented their assignments to an audience who offered insights into how

their intended meanings were interpreted and how their written texts could be improved.

> The tutorial directed me to where she [tutor] wants me to write on and which areas she wants to develop more. That's what basically the tutorial was for. [....] So with that I got to know what I want to write and then I know her mind. I knew what she really wanted me to write. (Oliver)

This shows that tutors provided oral feedback on how to improve the quality of student

writing. When asked about peer contribution, students revealed that feedback was

mostly provided by tutors and only occasionally by peers.

Rita seemed to be very positive about oral presentations, viewing it as an important

means of legitimate peripheral participation in the discourse practices (Lave & Wenger

1991). She described revising her assignment thoroughly when preparing for the

presentation.

> Before I give a presentation I had to refine again and again my assignment, to try to get the summary or to get the best part from my assignment. [...] In fact, I believe it is a good form, very helpful and very powerful form to energise us. We are not .... I mean passive. We have to be active to speak out our thoughts, minds and our ideas.

However after failing the assignment, Rita questioned the usefulness of these

interactions.

> ...why I passed the presentation but I couldn't pass my written work. It really makes people lost. [...] I think the presentation is....really a distortion or distraction.

Clearly, Rita was baffled to learn that neither tutors nor peers were able to identify the issues with her writing. These accounts suggest tutors need to provide explicit feedback on what and how to improve, whereas students need to learn the purposes of and the ways these interactions work.

## 7.4 Electronic Feedback

During the writing processes, all students engaged in electronic communication with tutors and peers (see Appendixes 7.1 – 7.4). They reported employing it to clarify the task requirements and the key concepts, negotiate the choice of assignment topic and ask for assistance in searching for resources and in making sense of written feedback. Most participants were required to submit assignment outlines as email attachments, so tutors could ensure that students followed the task requirements and could provide suggestions for further revision, using the comment function in Microsoft Word. Three students found this means of communication helpful.

Tutors and/or dissertation supervisors provided comments on content and rhetorical issues and on grammatical errors.

> It is very good. He helped me to know where I am going, and what I have to do, not to go astray while I am writing. Helping during the time I was writing, that was very helpful. [...] You have to discuss with him [tutor] what you are trying to do. (Oliver)

As a result of these interactions, students tended to make further changes to their written texts.

> My supervisor said 'oh! You don't get to get interviews; they [school] will not allow to make interviews". I have to remove it. I've just based on documentary and just survey, questionnaire, and some open-ended questions so you can see, that's one of change in the methods. (Oliver)

Essentially, most students found electronic feedback as critical to receiving

individualised and well-timed support during the writing processes.

> When I was writing, I sent email to my tutors if I came across some problems. And the tutor gave me feedback soon. […] I thought my topic is a little bit more difficult, so I wanted to change the topic. But my tutor said that 'this assignment focused only on research method, so you don't worry about your topic just focus on your research methods'. (Hannah)

Still, electronic feedback was occasionally misleading or generated confusion. Two

students reported that it was sometimes vague and general. This drawback might have

been caused by procedures surrounding the provision of electronic feedback at WIE.

Students were required to submit an A4 outline that often was a poor representation of

the whole assignment and students' objectives.

> The idea is that we should only look I think at a side of A4, outline of the work. I think that's often a very-very poor guide to what actually people will write and I think as an approach to helping people it is actually quite limited. (Respondent 5)

This mode of feedback was arguably more effective when students submitted the whole

paper or a great deal of it, so tutors gained a better understanding of what students

intended to write and were able to supply more specific comments.

Findings indicated that the effectiveness of electronic communication was undermined

by issues similar to other types of feedback. For instance, an insufficient explanation of

why certain amendments had to be made engendered confusion. Therefore, Mary and

Rita could not make full sense of recommendations, as tutors failed to explain the

reasons behind their comments. On these occasions, they reported that they passively

implemented tutors' comments without understanding them. Another reason that could

have undermined the potential of electronic feedback was the type of language used to

provide it. Thus, Rita sometimes misinterpreted the intent of electronic feedback, failing

to implement tutors' suggestions that caused low academic performance.

> I quickly sent my outline to him and he agreed with me with my negotiated topic. [...]
> He said I am so ....I am too ambitious. I made the assignment to look like a dissertation.
> So he thinks we don't need to regard the assignment as a dissertation. And I have to say
> it is very interesting [another module] tutor she also thinks I don't need to regard the
> assignment as a dissertation.

It appeared that the way the tutor formulated the comments turned out to be misleading

for Rita. In his comments, the tutor pointed that she was too ambitious and did not need

to treat the assignment as a dissertation, but Rita regarded this comment as 'flattery' and

the use of 'don't need' sounded like an optional food for thought rather than a strong

recommendation. Even after receiving the same comments on another assignment she

was writing at the same time, Rita decided not to implement these suggestions. Thus, her

desire to challenge herself by writing large-scale studies coupled with the tutor's

'flattering' comment prompted her to persist with her initial big plan.

Hannah experienced the same interactional blocks in communicating electronically as

she did in face-to-face situations.

> If I think "Oh, I have to write email to tutor, I have to write an email to teachers" I just
> feel "Ah! I don't like to communicate with the teachers". That is maybe the problem for
> all Chinese students. (Hannah)

Accordingly, students' individual differences may also compromise their participation in

the literacy practices.

Rita indicated to have difficulty in interpreting a tutor's emails.

209

...he has a very strange habit in emailing. When he emails, he never uses commas. When he emails, there is a long sentence and you don't know where to break it. [...] I need a native speaker to help to read them.

Consequently, tutors need to be careful not only with how they formulate their comments but also with the technical aspects (e.g. punctuation) of providing such feedback, so that students could understand and interpret it correctly.

### 7.4.1 Electronic Communication during Writing up the Dissertation

Over the course of preparing for and writing up the dissertation, all five students received formative intervention in the form of face-to-face and electronic supervision. Participants emailed tutors with their drafts, set up meetings to discuss the emerging issues and negotiated possible changes.

> I have written like 10 drafts. He corrected them, then he sent me back. [...] I did some redrafting, then I corrected it as well. [...] The tutor suggested to narrow it down because I chose a wide topic, to reduce my scope, some of things to cover that he mentioned. (Oliver)

However, Rita complained about difficulties in establishing and maintaining an ongoing communication with her dissertation supervisor. She reported that she relied on her supervisor's help and struggled when he delayed his electronic comments. She believed that it was the supervisor's job to engage in continuous loop of feedback-response stages. The evidence showed that once the provision was decreased or removed, the student felt lost and could not act on her own.

> There was one week I couldn't do any work further. [...] Without his comments, I couldn't do anything. It is not a matter of confidence; it is the matter of direction. You couldn't find the direction if you don't get any comments. (Rita)

Having received low grades and a failure, Rita became increasingly reliant on tutors' support. She looked persistently for detailed explanations and individualised attention

for every step she undertook to complete her thesis. Accordingly, Rita sometimes

displayed unrealistic expectations of supervisor's interventions.

> ...as soon as I got the comments, I was full of energy and motivation and I tried to finish the revising work as soon as possible. For example, when I got the comments at 7 pm in the evening I would focus on the revising and I sent him back on the next morning. [...] but he didn't agree with my individual style. He thought I didn't pay enough attention to all of those points in his comments.

This also indicates that Rita did not possess appropriate revising strategies, as she was

not capable to use the feedback to inform the further revision. Hannah also experienced

failure. However, she had fewer dissertation supervisions and sought less supervisor's

support. She had to request a half-year extension to rewrite a failed assignment and to

write up her dissertation. During this half year, Hannah hardly communicated with her

tutors, believing that they did not have any responsibility for students who were on

extension.

Two students indicated that they also engaged in electronic feedback with their peers in

search of additional assistance with their writing. For instance, Hannah reported

communicating occasionally with her peers via instant messaging (MSN) for clarifying

issues on the content and organisation of the assignments.

> My classmates, we sometimes can discuss ....the topic on ....MSN, sometimes 'I have troubles on' [gesturing typing] and we discuss and if they have troubles they ask me. And I can get some new idea from them.

Furthermore, Molly stated that email communication with peers was a valuable tool for

building up dynamic peer work groups, helping each other and maintaining the

motivation for succeeding.

> ...we had a lot of emails going on. [...] We just received emails from some people everyday, so it really helps a lot cause ...it widens the resources, the base and also helps

the group dynamic as well, cause like if I am working alone I will be quite lazy but working with them I just have to work hard.

This excerpt reveals the motivational power of the peer interactions, which is crucial to student learning. Clearly, electronic feedback provided some valuable venues for students to interact with tutors and peers and to receive ongoing support for their writing.

## 7.5 Written Feedback

Departmental practices required that all Masters written work was assessed holistically and anonymously. Students' assignments were judged against relevant assessment criteria and were assigned an overall mark, which was accompanied by tutors' written comments. Written feedback was generally returned a month after the submission date. The analysis of feedback sheets (see section 4.5.4) revealed that tutors tended to provide extended commentary on content focusing less on form errors (see Table 7.1).

**Table 7.1 The amount of written comments on feedback sheets**

| Type of comments | Amount of comments (%) |
|---|---|
| Content comments | 85.5 |
| Form comments | 14.5 |

The length of written feedback differed. Thus, six out of twelve feedback sheets that students submitted were one page in length, five were one page and a half and one feedback sheet included almost two pages. However, the density of written text within the sheets varied greatly. According to table 7.2, the number of words ranged from 134 words per feedback to 706 words. One feedback included almost five times as many words as the shortest feedback sheets, which contained on average 144 words each.

212

**Table 7.2 The number of words per feedback**

| | No. of words per feedback | | No. of words per feedback |
|---|---|---|---|
| Feedback 1 | 272 | Feedback 7 | 658 |
| Feedback 2 | 363 | Feedback 8 | 136 |
| Feedback 3 | 136 | Feedback 9 | 330 |
| Feedback 4 | 327 | Feedback 10 | 164 |
| Feedback 5 | 600 | Feedback 11 | 541 |
| Feedback 6 | 561 | Feedback 12 | 706 |

Most feedback sheets identified aspects that went wrong and potential changes that

could have improved them. Additionally, most tutors made corrections on the text

marking grammatical, punctuation, typographical errors and missing references. They

also inserted short remarks and rhetorical questions on the margins of the texts.

The examination of the interview transcripts showed that all five students valued

immensely tutors' written comments and recommendations on all aspects of their texts.

> I think it [feedback] is useful, because the tutor told me lots of the weaknesses of the assignment 1, and lots of comments on structure and idea of the assignment. […] Then in my assignment he gave me grammar corrections, and you can see he marked the problem which I should notice. (Hannah)

Students indicated that written feedback enabled them to acquire academic conventions

and to learn tutors' expectations.

> I kind of know how to secure a higher mark now, because I think I kind of realise ….what the requirements are, because they want people to be specific, they stressed many times. […] This …I was specific as much as possible, then I think from this grade, this comment, I think they like it. (Molly)

Four out of five students acknowledged that they used their written feedback for feed

forward purposes in following work. They devised further plans for writing

development, set objectives for their following assignments and regulated their writing

behaviours in the light of previous feedback.

> ...they are helpful, they are really, really helpful. Because when I am doing another assignment now, I will take corrections to that like single line spacing, the references before appendix, than others. Then if I am doing my main dissertation work, I have to take methodology in consideration. (Oliver)

Hannah stated that she rarely employed written feedback to inform her next assignments.

She acknowledged to have used her previous feedback on one occasion where the

writing task was divided into two inter-related parts (HA 1 and HA 2). Thus, the

feedback sheet of assignment 1 encouraged her to reflect on the tutor's commentary and

incorporate it into assignment 2. Accordingly, the feedback sheet for assignment 2

praised her attempts to improve the text in the light of the previous comments.

> This is an improvement on the first assignment, showing progression and taking on board some of the earlier feedback. (Feedback sheet, HA 2)

Otherwise, Hannah did not use written feedback for feed forward purposes in subsequent

writing.

> I don't think it [prior writing experiences] is useful for my dissertation because it is different topics. […] I have no idea about your question, really. If I think about my dissertation I don't think about other things.

Hannah seemed to possess poor self-regulative skills in monitoring her writing

behaviours and in devising plans for her writing development and this may explain

partly why she needed an extension to complete the course.

### 7.5.1 Miscommunications in Written Feedback

Findings revealed that on several occasions all five students misunderstood the written

feedback, failing to see where exactly they fell short of producing effective work.

Consequently, students developed a distorted view of the comments and grades. For instance, Oliver commented on one of his feedback sheets:

> It says it is a good work, but a lot of typing errors, because I can see there are typing errors and missing the ending –s,-s,-s. Basically, that was my typing. [...] And I think that's really a problem here. And I think they also they want me to strike the balance between materials from sources and my own comments.

After analysing it, he concluded:

> Oliver: Yes, for this one I hoped to get at least B but ....
>
> Interviewer: So do you think that most of the points were cut down because of typing errors?
>
> Oliver: Yes, that's what caused the mark.

Yet, the tutor's feedback sheet clearly indicated that he had managed to produce "a relevant commentary", which would have definitely benefited from more attention to the analysis and critique of resources and student's own comments (Feedback sheet, OA 5). Oliver's misconception about the reason for poor performance might be explained by the repetition of the same comment. Thus, the first marker indicated in two different parts of the feedback sheet that he had made numerous grammatical errors and this was reiterated by the moderator. Additionally, the first marker made a substantial number of corrections on the text. This approach perhaps exaggerated the importance of grammatical accuracy in Oliver's eyes, who believed that this was the primary cause of his poor achievement.

As Table 7.2 shows, there were three short feedback sheets offering only general commentaries, few recommendations and few or no grammar and/or typographical corrections. Additionally, Mary reported that she had received short and vague feedback

on two assignments. On these occasions, students longed for lengthier feedback that could have offered them a clear sense of tutors' expectations, writing standards and information about where they were falling short and where they were performing adequately. They believed that vague and decontextualised feedback did not contribute to their writing development and did not prevent them from making the same mistakes again.

> We want to have more practical comments because last time we had a whole page of comments, even if I got a low grade but when I read the comments 'Yes, you are right. I am wrong, I made some mistakes'. So I was convinced that I deserved that mark. This one is kind of more general and that was 'soundly argued' but never tell me what part was well-argued and which part was not. [...] I couldn't learn from the comments. (Molly)

This excerpt revealed not only participant's demand for more detailed comments, but also the confusion that vague feedback generated over the appropriateness of the grade contrasted with the tutor's comments. The lack of specific comments to show where Molly managed to be critical and where she managed to argue the theories soundly prompted her to conclude that she might have been given a higher grade than she deserved.

> This marker might be [….] a bit more lenient than our course tutor.

Molly approached her peer to address this confusion, who eventually suggested that the lack of details might have been caused by her own assignment, elaborating:

> We [Molly and her peer] both were teachers before, we marked students' writings. We feel strongly for some students' writings, but we don't feel anything for other writings. It might be… just it happens to be that my writing didn't evolve strong comments. So that's why they give me general comments.

This shows that students believed that markers followed their own preferences when assessing an assignment rather than the institutional assessment criteria. Furthermore,

216

Molly attributed the high grade on her first assignment to the length and level of task difficulty, suggesting that she assigned her performance to external factors rather than to her writing ability.

All four female participants stated that they experienced deep affective states such as frustration, disappointment and even shock when they received lower grades than expected. According to students' accounts, the period of low-spirit lasted from a couple of hours till several days. On these occasions, they often struggled to make sense of and interpret the feedback. This situation persisted throughout the whole year.

> I feel bad, depressed for few days actually. At first I just don't see why… it is not…. really I don't see why – but I did not expect that low, the grade. So it took me some time to digest the news. (Molly, C+)

Three female students occasionally perceived tutors' comments and grades as an inadequate reflection of their capabilities and efforts invested in the writing processes, doubting their marking accuracy.

> The first glance when I got it, I focused on the comments, and this is the first day and maybe the second day I will think deeply into 'Should I agree with him or I think he is not so careful as I am or yes, I think he is right'. So second day, I will be doubtful about comments. [...] I will be doubtful to question whether he or she gave the right or precise mark or comments. And the third day, I will think about the next task. (Rita, C)

The intensity of these experiences depended on students' previous self-efficacy beliefs and their expectations of themselves. Having received low grades, students with high expectations underwent shorter incapacitating experiences than students with lower self-efficacy beliefs. When these students made sense of tutors' comments and felt less anxious, they tried to reflect on their errors to devise action plans to avoid them in subsequent assignments.

> Last time I …okay, I know I didn't do well, I got a bad grade, so I worked much harder. (Molly)

Students believed that better strategies and increased effort could bring future successes. Hence, they tended to work harder and to persist with their writing development when they received low grades. However, repeated low performance raised self-doubts with two female students, who came to believe that they did not possess sufficient capabilities to achieve high performance.

Students adopted different approaches to interpreting and responding to unclear written feedback. For instance, Rita was more likely to reflect by herself on the potential explanations for her low grades, often concluding that tutors' rigid marking styles were to blame for her poor results. Hannah reflected by herself or turned to her colleagues for additional explanations. As mentioned above Molly discussed it with peers, but she was not always successful to substantiate her speculations with reasonable explanations. Mary usually arranged face-to-face tutorials to talk about the feedback and to get a fuller picture of what went wrong and where. Oliver tended to reflect on the feedback by himself, sometimes failing to draw the right conclusions.

Having analysed written feedback, most participants concluded that there was a variation in tutors' approaches to marking. Some tutors provided detailed and specific feedback; others supplied them with short and general comments.

> It is different from other markers, this would be the first time I can see so many ….like markings, corrections in between the lines. [...] The format of feedback is different. They [other tutors] don't write between lines. That doesn't mean that they don't read it, but they just comment by the side there. [...] So teachers have different ways to mark. (Oliver)

Besides, they stated that there was a difference in tutors' expectations and criteria.

> Different tutors ...maybe they have different requirements. Maybe just like X, he doesn't mind if in your work you just used "I" or ...how to say...it is not very formal work. Some tutors focus on the language ....they are very strict on the language, you should use academic words. And you ....and you can't use "I". (Hannah)

Rita went further, arguing that the variation in tutors' marking was due to age and gender.

> I believe some elder teachers, they...they are more strict. [...] Because some not elder teachers they have open mind, open heart and they can.....they can appreciate....I mean they think highly of your personal style, but some advanced tutors or much elderly tutors, they are little stubborn with their own taste, it is hard to change.

> I know it really depends on different tutor's taste. [...] Some men – professors and tutors – they have more broader mind and broader thoughts to accept very active innovative writing style or student, or individual style. But some female...female lady tutors, they are so strict with their personal ideas.

These quotations suggest that tutors were not consistent with their marking preferences.

The analysis of feedback sheets indicated that a number of tutors judged the quality of written texts in relation to the use of disciplinary knowledge. Thus, eight out of twelve feedback sheets either praised or criticised students' use of content covered in the modules. For instance,

> Broader and fuller attention to the reading in this area provided during the course would have helped you here. (MoA, 2, C+)

> You make a comprehensive measure of issues involved and are confident in making theoretical considerations, which is particularly noticeable in your use and understandings of Bernstein, Newman et al and Aoki to shape your thinking. (MoA 3, A)

> See Cohen et al (2007) Chapter 6 for an excellent source. (RA1, B)

This illustrates that tutors expected the use of materials covered in modules. However, students often failed to recognise the centrality of course content to the completion of their work. Consequently, they referred to other resources that were less privileged in their discourse community (see also section 8.2).

Thus, written feedback seemed to be a valuable tool for introducing students to the writing conventions and standards privileged in the discourse community. Nevertheless, a number of factors can undermine students' understanding of written feedback, which may result in developing misconceptions about academic writing and their writing competence. Essentially, there was a variation in tutors' marking preferences that conveyed contradictory information about the highly-valued writing conventions.

## 7.6 Interactions with Peers

The analysis of research interviews indicated that only two out of five participants had experienced peer feedback in their previous degree(s). Molly had experienced peer feedback as part of a writing class she attended in her first degree; Oliver had occasionally turned to his friends when completing previous assignments. He had also written collaboratively an article with a colleague. These results are consistent with the quantitative data analysis that indicated that over one third of Masters students had never experienced peer feedback.

Interview analysis showed that at the beginning of the academic year all participants were negative about peer feedback. They considered peers as less competent, tending to provide comments mainly on surface issues and mechanical errors. They also expressed a preference for tutors' feedback, as tutors had more authority and power than peers.

> …sometimes I find it that it [peer feedback] is not in-depth enough. [...] It tends to be shallow. It is like "okay, good language skills", the comment will be supportive, something like that. I really do not find very helpful comparing to the tutor's comments. (Molly)

These results corroborate the questionnaire findings that suggested that over one third of respondents either gave a neutral rating for peer feedback or considered it ineffective. There were quite a few occasions where formal peer support mechanisms were set up to share their written work and to receive peer feedback. For instance, one module provided peer feedback activities, prompting students to fill in feedback sheets to give comments and suggestions to writers.

> After my presentation, there were some questions raised by other group members. [...] some of the questions inspired me and some of them remind me I need to put more efforts in each parts in my written work. (Rita)

Two other modules entailed oral presentations that offered opportunities to receive feedback from peers. However, it has been suggested that feedback was mainly provided by tutors and only occasionally by peers (see section 7.3). Findings indicated that most peer feedback was received during informal peer support interactions, when participants turned to peers to share their writing experiences, exchange opinions on each other's topics and ask for clarification about task requirements and subject knowledge, etc.

> I always discuss about my topic with my friends: do you think my topic is okay or [could] you give me some advice. When we discuss maybe there are new ideas come out. (Hannah)

Interviews showed that informal peer interactions played a fairly important role in making sense of and in interpreting writing conventions and tutors' oral and written feedback.

Besides, most students observed vicariously how peers performed in similar activities.

> ...all of us think it [assignment] is a difficult work for us. And I know other students, [...] even very brilliant students, he is a part-time student and he works in college and his major is in this field and he also feels it is so difficult. And he also asked for an extension. (Rita)

221

This shows that students, who took notice of peers who were perceived as competent but struggled to write in similar context, expressed self-doubts about completing the assignments successfully.

### 7.6.1 Changes in Peer Interactions

The analysis of transcripts suggested a qualitative change in students' perceptions of peer feedback during the year. If initially all five students were negative about the peers' ability to offer effective feedback, once they engaged in writing they started to seek each others' opinions and support. For instance, Hannah admitted that most support provided during the writing processes came from her peers. She reported that her friends helped her to proofread, decide on the working topic, search for materials and revise the written work.

> I always ask my friend to have a look at dissertation- is it logically, or do you think the question – which is necessary, but which one is useless. I always ask them and talk with my friends in China, because they are teachers. [...] When I finish one part I will ask them "could you have a check? Check it just for the language, sentence, or just something strange you feel, just tell me".

As Hannah had limited contact with her dissertation supervisor, her peers helped her to change the research questions, design the study, choose the methodology and proofread the dissertation. Additionally, Hannah asked her friends who were teachers in her home country to provide feedback on the feasibility of her project and on the data collection instruments. They also helped to implement the instruments in their school.

> All my friends are all teachers, it is very easy – I just contacted my friends and they can find some colleagues to do my questionnaires.

Clearly, Hannah preferred to turn to her peers rather than to tutors.

> They [tutors] are always very busy and I don't want to disturb them. [...] I can ask other students to help me, just to give me some advice.

The accounts suggest that due to her strongly-held beliefs on the authority of tutors and her poor interactional skills, Hannah was more confident interacting with peers rather with tutors. However, Hannah noted that she mainly interacted with peers from the same cultural background, because NES and EAL students hardly communicated.

> You know the X [name of] module, there are lots of local people. […] they don't want to talk to you: maybe not...they don't want to talk with you… just we don't have same topic. And when we discuss something, we couldn't understand what they said. […] Yes, it is part of my fault because my English is not very good, so if I talk to others, it is difficult for others to understand us clearly.

This account revealed her difficulties in interacting with NES students, both because of her linguistic fluency and NES students' reservation about mingling with students from other cultural backgrounds.

Rita held negative perceptions of peer feedback, believing that it could compromise her creativity of expressing her opinions and of pursuing her interests.

> We do not need to pay more attention to how others think about our work; that is my opinion. We just try to be ourselves to write freely.

Despite having these negative perceptions at the beginning of the course, Rita asked a colleague to proofread an assignment. Besides, she valued sharing her writing experience with other students in terms of understanding how they improved as writers and what techniques they employed, what worked for them and what did not. At the end, Rita conceded that peers had contributed to some extent to her writing development.

> If you discuss your writing with other classmates and maybe they can introduce their own ideas. […] So I think I got some motivation and inspiration from peers' ideas and peers' writing style. And if you are isolated and being a lonely writer you couldn't improve your work.

This excerpt suggests that interactions with more experienced members of the discourse community had a motivational power. Similarly to Hannah, Rita perceived that there was no collaborative interaction among NES and EAL colleagues.

> It is not very cooperative, it is not very ....I mean we didn't keep contact with each other. So it is not like a group work; it is very, very personal, individual. So I didn't get some help or cooperation or collaboration.

She added:

> It is so hard to get contact because they [NES students] seldom talk with us, overseas students. And we seldom talk to them. [...] And the British students are always together as if we are different groups. But I tried to break through, to overcome this bias, so I tried....I tried to make myself be a group member in those native speakers.

These accounts show that some students viewed the interactions with peers as a means of developing a sense of belonging to the community.

Oliver did not tend to seek peer feedback believing that tutors' help and his ample disciplinary knowledge were enough to guarantee high grades.

> I have ample knowledge about the topic before. [...] At times there are some work you are confident about it, what is the point [for peers' help].

Later in the year, when tutor written feedback suggested that one of his weaknesses was making grammatical and typographical errors that at times cost him points, he asked friends to proofread his dissertation. Besides, he sought additional perspectives on the topic of his dissertation.

> Interaction with the colleagues at times it helps because you talk about the project and say what you are writing, then they can give a general idea of what they are doing as well.

Molly was the only student who experienced ongoing peer feedback. This was due to the nature of the Drama and Theatre Education course that encouraged collaborative work.

Students devised together drama schemes to be taught in particular schools. In term two, based on similar interests Molly teamed up with two NES students to work on a teaching project.

> We just team up and go to school and teach. While we're teaching we were also researching. [...] We planned teaching together. And then we had a few meetings either in class or outside the class with the tutor. She gave us a lot of ideas like how you can do this or is it possible, or what you can take out of this.

This task provided Molly with the opportunity to interact with her colleagues, work collaboratively and receive feedback on practical and writing activities. Over the course of the academic degree, Molly regarded peer feedback as a formative developmental process that gave opportunities to discuss each other's texts and to discover additional interpretations of them.

> The other thing we try to help each other to find our position as I said, cause you have to find how specific you are. [...] it was my friend who told me that I don't have to write every game that you play with the children, just have an overall discussion: what is the main focus of the lesson and how do we link the whole ten or fifteen together.

Having engaged in regular interactions with her peers, Molly acquired important writing conventions valued in the discourse community.

> I know somehow from last term all the people who wrote well they wrote about their own experience. I tried to generalise kind of you know global drama pedagogy. And it does not work. So I learnt to be specific.

She managed to transfer this perspective successfully to her final assignments. Besides, Molly seemed to be more confident about the quality of her work as a result of peer interaction.

> At least I know I am doing things the other people are doing as well [laughing], which is very important. Yes, I know ...okay first, all those subheadings are appearing in other people's essays, my classmates' essays. […] So, even if I did not do well I won't be far too much.

The Drama and Theatre Education modules entailed the support of doctoral students who helped tutors to deliver and organise activities during the sessions. They also provided students with exemplifications materials of previous years' assignments and advice on writing and on conducting students' performing projects. Furthermore, Molly referred to tutor assistants to clarify the dissertation conventions.

> They said because for 20,000 words thing, it is very long so if you keep going on and you never wrap up the people might lose track of what you have been talking about, so that is kind of necessary for you to wrap up from time to time and remind people what the thing is about.

At the end of the course, Molly acknowledged that she relied on peers' feedback more often than on tutors' feedback.

> From peers the most and tutors are available if we have questions.

Throughout the year participants changed their perceptions of peer feedback and sought it more often. The most striking changes occurred to Molly's views, who believed that her peers' experiences and interactions enriched her learning.

> We have an active group, hardworking people and everyone is genuinely interested in what we are doing. So we got practitioners, we got theatre people, we got teachers, we got clown, yes – we got a classmate who is a clown and we got like normal English teachers, we got researchers. [...] we even got drama therapist – so it is a very, very good diversity....and we have some previous students. I rely on them.

Hence, the Masters of Drama and Theatre Education provided support to maintain peer interaction that seemed to work well. The peer interactions constituted a potential opportunity for students to engage in the literacy practices and to move to a growing participation in the discourse community. Importantly, Masters students present a very diverse group in the terms of their educational, professional and cultural backgrounds that could serve as a valuable resource for student learning.

## 7.7 Conclusions

In this chapter, I analysed how EAL students engaged in communication with members of their discourse community to learn to write in their setting. These interactions provided students with opportunities to access the conventions and values and to move to a growing participation in the community's practices. Despite the satisfaction with this support, there was a range of factors that constrained students' participation in these encounters. Such factors as timing, the nature of feedback, the type of language used to provide feedback and students' individual differences occasionally limited their academic performance. Crucially, students' failures to interact successfully engendered self-doubts and drops in students' self-efficacy beliefs and led to erroneous views on academic writing.

# Chapter 8 – Interactions with Institutional Artefacts

## 8.1 Introduction

This chapter details EAL students' interactions with institutional artefacts that influenced their understanding of academic conventions, task requirements and their perceptions of academic writing. It highlights participants' views on exemplification materials, guidelines and assessment criteria published in the module handbooks.

## 8.2 Guidelines

Students were introduced to the task requirements through guidelines defined in the module handbooks and supplied by tutors for individual assignments. The guidelines differed in length and specificity. Some of them were short and general referring to such areas as evidence of relevant reading, clarity and coherence of structure, warnings about plagiarism and referencing. Others were lengthy, giving additional explanations of assignment structure and content, lists of questions to guide the writing processes and the core references. All students praised the usefulness of the detailed guidelines.

> I think the most helpful thing is the tutor give us a list of the key elements. And after the tutorial, I followed his advice on the list of the elements. So, I refined my work. And it really did work, it did work. And I feel so thankful for the tutor. (Rita)

Students valued considerably when tutors explained the written guidelines during module sessions.

> ...the professor gave us a piece of guidelines telling us what to focus on. On that it says that….there are some core works, core references. He said ….ok, that is very useful – focus on them. The theories will support your writing. That is why I started reading those. […] There are very clear guidelines, you cannot avoid writing them. So I just …based on these three things and theories to support me, the structure came quite clear and quite easily. (Molly)

These accounts indicate that students were more likely to take notice of guidelines if they were verbally reinforced by tutors. Alternatively, students approached tutors to seek further explanation for requirements they did not fully understand. Students clearly needed numerous opportunities and time to internalise the guidelines.

Findings indicated that some students tended to dismiss the recommendations published in the module guidelines. A number of them advised students specifically to relate their assignments to the materials learned on the course and to the reading lists. Yet, all students occasionally failed to incorporate the recommended content in their assignments. Additionally, two students consistently referred their writing to other resources. They reported relying on materials published in their own countries when they contextualised their assignments in their native educational systems. Most importantly, they appeared to misinterpret the importance of using the recommended reading lists, selecting other bibliographies that often compromised the quality of their writing.

> She [tutor] thought that a lot of stuff is related ...more related to the another domain. She also thinks there are references not in her reading list. Overall, she thought it is nothing to do with her module. (Rita)

When Hannah failed an assignment, the tutor advised her to incorporate particular resources in the revised assignment. However, she ignored the tutor's recommended reading list explaining:

> He wanted to read some information or materials from this journal. [...] I think some .....some parts didn't related to my research questions, so I didn't use them. But my tutor still wants me to combine them. [...] So I don't know what the relationship is with my topic. (Hannah)

Clearly, students who did not fully understand the theoretical concepts underpinning the modules encountered difficulties in connecting the topic to the recommended literature. These excerpts suggest that factors such as students' misconceptions about the role of module content and their poor grasp of disciplinary knowledge constrained their use of the published guidelines.

## 8.3 Assessment Criteria

The department provided students with an assessment criteria grid that detailed the grade descriptors and acceptable performance for each criterion at each grade. The departmental practices of introducing assessment criteria were the following:

> We are quite open about what the criteria are. [...] We don't run sessions on these assessment criteria and we are looking in general for, yes ...I have the marking up here – comprehension, analysis and critique and presentation. That's all there, so people can see what the criteria are and they are very good. Actually within that criteria, so within the critique we give examples about what would be an A or an A assignment, what would constitute a B, what would constitute a C grade. (Respondent 2)

Importantly, Respondent 5 believed that the departmental presentation of assessment criteria could have benefited from using the exemplification materials.

> ...another way of learning not just for overseas students but for all students is to have assessment criteria actually cross-referenced with exemplification material. So, for instance, if you are talking about students' being able to critique… arguments, materials, theories and so on – actual examples where students move from describing something to explaining it, to analysing it, to evaluating and critiquing.

The respondent indicated that cross-referencing criteria would not only help students to comprehend them but also it would promote a shared understanding of key concepts among markers.

> ...there isn't a shared understanding of these terms; people develop their own understanding of it and it is different than the next person. Then, you've got students who might be getting advice from different people and if they explain it at all, they are describing it differently. You know, no wonder it is difficult.

Findings showed that the explicit assessment criteria and grade descriptors failed to transfer meaningful knowledge on assessment standards to students. When discussing their current writing practices and the factors that might have contributed to acquiring writer's knowledge, they hardly ever mentioned employing or checking the assessment criteria. The only participant, who stated he referred occasionally to the assessment criteria, was Oliver.

> I made a plan. [...] The plan should go in the line with the assessment criteria. They need to agree. [...] These are the things I am looking for. These are the things that I want to put in my writings. (Oliver)

Rita was the only student to discuss the role of assessment criteria in her writing.

> ...the criteria is very hard to reach. Every time when I begin to write I leave those criteria away, because if I start to think about those criteria too much, it will make me more stressed. So I keep them in mind but I try not to be influenced by them. [...] I know some tutors always remind us 'don't forget the criteria. You can...you can live up to them'. But I couldn't.

She contended further:

> ...teachers always introduce these criteria to us but it depends on students, on their personal styles, because some students might think 'Ah! We do not have any ideas about how to form a concrete essay, what is this use for? What can this thing offer to me? If I read this I feel more nervous. So, I have better not to know this, not to remember this, just to forgetting and focus on the project. I think if I am a brilliant student and not have problems with forming an essay, I will have some extra-energy to read this.

These excerpts show that the student struggled to understand and apply the assessment criteria when writing. This resulted in her denial of the importance of assessment criteria to novices who were still learning how to organise and complete an assignment. She suggested that considering the assessment criteria was a high-order competence, which was typical only of excellent writers. Instead, she perceived written feedback as an important index of how successful she was in meeting these criteria and what she needed to do to reach them.

> I think the most important thing it is to get some improvement done from following the feedback. Because the feedback is made against those criteria, if I every time got feedback I learn a lot from my feedback and then I improve my work. (Rita)

This is consistent with tutors' approach to marking writing assignments in the light of assessment criteria.

> ...what we have to do is to ensure as far as we can that the variation in marking is down to variation in the quality of the assignments, it is not down to the variation of the interpretation of criteria by the markers. So it is important that that kind of standardisation happens. (Respondent 2)

The views on assessment criteria raised important issues concerning the way they were communicated and the variation in their understanding amongst the members of this discourse community. In discussing the features highly-valued in marking an assignment, tutors suggested the following priorities (see Table 8.1).

**Table 8.1 Respondents' views on marking priorities.**

| Respondent 1 | Respondent 2 | Respondent 3 | Respondent 4 | Respondent 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ▪ Critical analysis<br>▪ Relevance of materials to answer the question<br>▪ Logical flow<br>▪ Grammatical accuracy | ▪ In line with assessment criteria (Critical analysis; Construct a persuasive argument) | ▪ Critical analysis<br>▪ Logical flow<br>▪ Well-organised paper/presentation<br>▪ Coherence<br>▪ Construct a persuasive argument | ▪ Demonstrate understanding of key concepts, theories<br>▪ Well-written<br>▪ Well-structured<br>▪ Well-referenced<br>▪ To be of practical use for writer<br>▪ Connected to the topic<br>▪ Critical analysis<br>▪ Connected to the module content | • Relevance of materials to answer the question<br>• Extensive reading/well-informed<br>• Construct a persuasive argument<br>• Answer the task question |

As table shows, tutors agreed on a number of fundamental features that characterised good written work. They believed that critical analysis of the disciplinary knowledge and students' evolving ideas was crucial. Besides, most valued assignments included relevant materials to answer the question, coherent and clear structure and persuasive arguments. Nonetheless, some tutors held some personal beliefs about good written work. For instance, one respondent prioritised assignments which were of practical use for writers; two respondents gave credits to assignments that had a logic flow. However, students' accounts suggested a sharper difference in markers' priorities than the respondents disclosed (see sections 6.6 & 7.5.1).

## 8.4 Samples of Previously Written Work

All five students had access to samples of the previous years' dissertations. Besides, the core module provided students with previous years' assignments. Students found these

exemplification materials useful as they gave explicit insights into how an academic

paper was structured and what could be counted as good academic writing.

> I've looked for a few things [in the samples] like how long is the bibliography list, how many references I have to get to make your writing well-researched. And plus I tried to see the proportion of different things like how much did they write on methodology and on the research findings (Molly).

Clearly, students learned about the structure, organisation of materials and technical

conventions such as the length of the chapters and referencing. Essentially, Oliver

emphasised that this provision was crucial particularly for him as a mature student who

preferred to learn independently and seek tutors' guidance far less.

> These [samples] are steps how to go about it [writing], because it is when they read it they can say 'okay, if I want to do well, I shouldn't do these mistakes, I shouldn't do that mistake. I think I make use of that anyway, especially for mature students. ....mature students, like postgraduates. Because they do more their studies on their own. (Oliver)

The optional modules did not supply exemplification materials. Thus, students who

struggled to complete an assignment expressed their wish for samples of previously

written work. For instance, in discussing the help that would have enabled her to pass a

failed assignment, Rita suggested that a sample of written work would have facilitated

her understanding of tutor's expectations and task requirements.

> ...for this assignment we didn't get any idea – what kind of assignment we need to complete or compose. If there are some samples just one or two samples with titles and subtitles, with terminology and literature, it is okay. And I will feel it easy job for me. (Rita)

Despite the provision of core reading lists, guidelines, samples and assessment criteria,

all five students reported occasionally struggling to make sense of writing tasks and

conventions.

...you don't really know the scope of the first assignment. [...] So at times I have been thinking: should I put this, should I put that? Should I ...miss out important things in the first assignments?' [...] ...you cannot really figure it [requirements] out. (Oliver, OA1)

In this case, Oliver participated in a number of literacy practices and interacted with tutors and institutional artefacts to understand the task requirements (see Appendix 7.2); yet, he struggled to meet the required standards, expressing frustration and confusion over the communication of the task requirements and genre conventions. His failure could be explained by bad timing of the provision and variation in tutors' priorities. Essentially, students believed that the provision of samples was helpful for their understanding of task requirements, tutors' expectations and genre conventions.

## 8.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I examined how EAL students interacted with institutional artefacts to acquire writing norms, clarify task requirements and reinforce writing behaviours. Students clearly valued the exemplification materials and guidelines to inform their writing processes. However, they occasionally faced problems with understanding the meanings and knowledge behind these artefacts, requiring additional advice on using them. Crucially, students seemed to disregard the assessment criteria that were strongly advocated by tutors for their central role in the enhancement of student learning.

# Chapter 9 – Interactions with the Training System

## 9.1 Introduction

This chapter describes participants' interactions with the training system that entailed taught modules, seminars, CELTE sessions and writing assignments. The chapter shows how these interactions either helped or constrained EAL students' understanding of writing conventions and values privileged in their discourse community.

## 9.2 Taught Modules

Four out of five students reported to have found a number of Masters modules useful. Students clearly expressed satisfaction with modules that combined seminars, oral presentations, guest talks, group discussions, practical activities and reading materials. Participants appreciated when they were offered participative opportunities to construct new knowledge and to acquire writing norms.

> This time we actually moved to theoretical ways. We did practical work as well, but after the practical work we always have discussions. […] afterwards we got some scheme work as well that helped us a lot. [...] I kind of can link up the lessons more with assignment this term. (Molly)

This format of modules facilitated students' acquisition of disciplinary knowledge and enhanced their motivation in writing.

> ...when I started the lecture [...] it sounded interesting to me and I want to know more, by the time I go half of the lectures, I started reading some books about it, start to get in touch with people who study these problems, start talking about it. It was a part of me, now it was an urge to write about it now. (Oliver)

Besides, it increased students' motivation in actively participating in the literacy practices.

> ...if some modules you like it, you interested in it, you will do better than others (Hannah).

Molly and Oliver's interactions with the module sessions were particularly interesting because of their approach to interconnecting the content of the modules with writing processes.

> ...when I have no clue where to start – I think 'okay, what I learnt from lectures' and that it gives me a very important clue. […] I thought – 'right, it must be in it'. So I just put it down. [...] And then I kind of summed up what I have learnt from the lectures, what issues we have discussed. (Molly)

These students used the content of the modules to inform the writing processes and to solve their misunderstandings of task requirements. This approach constituted an important strategy for completing assignments.

### 9.2.1 Criticisms of Modules

Findings reported that on several occasions students wished that modules offered more opportunities of constructing disciplinary knowledge than of playing games.

> I think our module sessions are slightly lacked some theory-based, [...] so for this module assignment I have to read....a lot for myself. [...] So it is really a big challenge for all of us, because....all of us think it is a difficult work for us because we hadn't got enough theory from the literature, so we feel a little weak in this field. [...] Too practical, I think. And too many games and ....plays. [...] Although we enjoyed some activities, but after that you felt lost. (Rita)

This suggests that students preferred sessions where tutors inducted them into the theoretical concepts and provided opportunities to discuss and make sense of them.

Another criticism of the module sessions was the variation in tutors' beliefs and values they brought to teaching. Students reported facing difficulties in ascertaining task requirements and markers' expectations when the module sessions were run by a number of tutors.

> ...you cannot really figure it [requirements] out because you have different lecturers coming in. People were coming, they will do this topic; people were coming, they will do this topic. Okay, they were saying during OA 1 and 2 assignments you need this, you need that. But this is where you really have to ask the tutor. (Oliver)

This arrangement also raised concerns about the variation in tutors' marking and assessment criteria, as students struggled to familiarise themselves with their expectations and priorities.

> ...for the RA 4 - because there are three tutors - they focus on different topics. So, all of us choose our own topic, but the three tutors will split for the different work. So I really wonder, because the three people don't have the same taste or they don't have the same judgement on the criteria. (Rita)

Despite the overall positive perceptions of the modules and support provided within the department, Mary and Hannah criticised the scarcity of module sessions and writing assignments that could have contributed to their further writing development.

> I have just four modules and four assignments. But they [my friends] have got lots of assignments, they have presentations, they have course work, they have group work but we don't have – we just listen lectures. (Hannah)

This excerpt shows that the student did not feel as an active member of the discourse community but rather as a passive recipient of knowledge. Indeed, Hannah perceived the

participative interactions as opportunities to gain access to insider knowledge of the

academic and professional communities.

> My friends come from different departments – they had their course work, they do their
> group work, they need ...to complete ...project. [...] It is not only you practise your oral
> skills, your speaking but you practise your ideas, thinking. Maybe after they graduate,
> they have to go to company work, working for some companies, the manager asks to do
> some projects – they know how to do it. But I don't know how to ....how to solve the
> students' problems or how to make teaching plan.

She also noted about the importance of sustaining students' motivation for learning:

> I research how to motivate the secondary school, how to motivate them, but why in the
> university we don't have how to motivate students - it is very funny. Because learning
> needs ...how to say....needs students feel interested or just feel motivated.

Research participants raised important issues surrounding the concept of discourse

community. They suggested a need for enough opportunities for legitimately accessing

the disciplinary values and for moving to a growing participation in the literacy

practices. Consequently, most students were not be able to fully commit to the

departmental conventions and were constrained to the periphery of the discourse

community.

## 9.3 Writing Assignments

The major goals of writing assignments were to enable students to acquire and assess

their disciplinary knowledge, transferable skills such as using IT, critiquing and

presentation skills.

> Definitely writing these two assignments, you learnt more things as the things you know
> before, just like academic writing, like how to write referencing, the ethics .....your
> methods which is basically the OA 1 all about. Yes, a bit of...analyse your data yourself.
> (Oliver)

239

Participants reported acquiring the writing conventions and norms specific to their context while writing.

> This dissertation does ....teach me how to write an academic paper, really. Because the assignment also teach us how to [meet] the higher requirements. So you can ...I just write an assignment, I used ...how to say ....oral language, but in the dissertation is academic. (Hannah)

Generally, students reported that writing assignments contributed to their development as writers.

> I have got more skilled and more professionate with my written work. [...] These assignments is really good exercise or practice for me and if I look back on the whole year of Masters study, I think the assignments and feedback are the most important part for me as a student here. [...] I couldn't forget those experiences with writing assignments. (Rita)

Students also revealed that they improved their L2 proficiency and expanded disciplinary terminology and general vocabulary.

> I think my English is... improved. [...] Before I need to translate, I need a dictionary to translate lots of words in one sentence and I cannot understand this meaning, this sentence. Now I don't need to translate too much. (Hannah)

Students acknowledged that all writing assignments differed in terms of task goals and tutors' expectations. An important aspect of students' interactions with the specific assignments was the task representation. Students engaged in a complex process of task representation in terms of perceiving the task, assigning goals to the task and employing certain writing strategies. They tended to reinterpret the tasks objectives defined in the module handbook to encompass their educational, personal and professional perspectives. More specifically, they set goals of acquiring valuable knowledge for their future career, completing the course assignments and researching relevant topics to their professional career.

240

I chose the topic as to complete the assignment, as well as I want to understand this topic in China. I think it is useful for me when I will be a teacher in the future. (Hannah)

Making the tasks personalised to their needs increased students' motivation. Findings revealed that when students were genuinely interested in their chosen topics they exhibited intrinsically motivated behaviours that helped to face difficulties or setbacks in writing.

> And I feel it [writing process] challenging not tedious, because it is my own interest and it is my own task. [...] So I think in the future I still follow this route to choose the interesting topic and then you not lose your interest. (Rita)

Some tutors assigned topics that students had to choose from and answer. Findings indicated that students sometimes encountered difficulties understanding the tasks set by tutors.

> I don't like they gave us the topics, because the topics they give us are more ….more limited. [...] maybe you cannot understand the topics ….what should you research? [...] All are similar and I couldn't understand what is problem the tutor wanted us to write or research. [...] And I don't know what ….which books we should read. So I think it is difficult. If I choose the topic by myself I can ….can know clearly the problem to write about. (Hannah)

Students preferred topics that were specific and meaningful to complete the writing tasks.

> I struggled with - what the criteria are, what does it mean, what is required and am I doing the right thing? Cause actually the questions is quite broad. [...] Basically, I cannot understand why I was just making a list of points. [...] It asked you 'what should be taught in the drama?' It is just everything. Up to now, I still think it should be everything. (Molly)

This suggests that there is a need for a careful planning and wording of the working titles, so students could make the most of these learning opportunities.

Many tutors set up negotiable writing tasks. For instance, most students preferred to contextualise the task in their native educational system or to the student age group they were familiar with. However, four students revealed that contextualising their topics in their native educational system sometimes posed challenges. Students assumed that tutors' lack of background in their educational systems caused misunderstandings and miscommunications. Besides, students believed that tutors often held beliefs that contradicted theirs.

> I think he holds his own personal ideas, although maybe it is true or not so true. After all, I've been in China for almost 30 years, I think my whole idea is more true than his idea. He is also interested in China but there are some bias or distorted ideas. I think my idea is more close to the real fact. (Rita)

Further, some students tended to slip into descriptive accounts of what they knew without referring to academic literature when writing about their educational systems or their personal experiences. For instance, Rita referred extensively to her own work experience in assignment three, generating criticisms from the tutor.

> You need also to control and limit your flights of personal feeling and expression. (Feedback sheet, RA 3)

When completing the writing assignments, participants adopted either a challenge or reformulation approach to constructing academic knowledge (Lea 1998). Occasionally, students interpreted the task as reformulating the course materials and replicating particular academic perspectives.

> ...I knew what they want from you – the assessment criteria and these materials, and the materials of lectures. (Oliver)

In contrast, they sometimes attempted to actively engage with the course materials to reflect their own personal needs and contexts, adopting therefore the challenge approach.

242

I was talking about the curriculum content because I chose a story that I myself like very much. I chose Billy Elliot. You know to design a curriculum on a story that I like, it is a very enjoyable thing. And also talking about the situation in Hong Kong, because as I said I have authority in that, and no one will argue with me about that. (Molly)

Most students tended to use their written feedback and writing experiences to guide the subsequent writing. However, findings suggested that the transfer of accumulated skills and knowledge to the following assignments produced mixed results. For instance, Molly and Mary managed to attain high results. Oliver and Rita's attempts at employing previous experiences to inform subsequent writing did not impact on the overall mark of the assignments. The feedback sheets indicated that their previous weaknesses had turned into strengths in the next assignments; however, they failed on other crucial writing aspects.

Writing assignments constituted an important way to introduce students to disciplinary knowledge and writing conventions. Students revealed using different approaches and strategies when completing their assignments. Most students tended to merge their professional and personal interests and their wider cultural contexts in their writing, which were often criticised by tutors. This suggests that there was gap between departmental and students' standards of good written work.

## 9.4 CELTE Support

As part of Masters programme, EAL students accessed the support provided by CELTE (see section 1.3). The following table summarises the type of CELTE provision each research participant followed before starting the Masters programme and throughout the academic year.

**Table 9.1 Participants' use of CELTE' support**

|  | Pre-sessional course | In-sessional course | Writing surgery |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rita | + | + | + |
| Mary | - | + | - |
| Oliver | - | + | - |
| Hannah | + | + | - |
| Molly | - | - | - |

### 9.4.1 Pre-sessional English Courses

Table 9.1 shows that two research participants attended the pre-sessional English courses before starting their academic degree. Both students were allocated to the same study group. Nevertheless, their perceptions and accounts of the pre-sessional courses were mixed and sometimes contradictory. Hannah indicated that these courses were useful for acquiring the writing conventions, as tutors explained how to structure academic assignments, how to write particular sections, how to reference correctly and what plagiarism is. In contrast, Rita experienced disappointment and regarded them as unhelpful and lacking in focus on academic writing.

> Pre-sessional course is not interested in the academic writing [...] so every time she [teacher] gave us almost dozen [...] of pages about online resources and she just handed out and we just read, read, read and we did not do any useful or helpful exercises.

However, Rita acknowledged that she learnt about the concept of *academic writing* for the first time during these courses. Moreover, she had been introduced to the concept of plagiarism and to referencing conventions. The difference in students' perceptions might be explained by differences in students' expectations of the courses and their previous writing experiences. More specifically, Hannah had not had any experience in producing academic writing in her previous course. Thus, she found any information valuable and

instructive. In contrast, Rita had written both in her previous degree and in her workplace. So, she sought more meaningful information about academic writing. Nevertheless, they both reported learning particular conventions and norms that informed their subsequent writing.

### 9.4.2 In-Sessional English Courses

Table 9.1 reveals that four out of five participants attended the in-sessional courses. Overall participants agreed that these classes were helpful and provided support with some aspects of writing.

> I have attended the in-sessional English classes, and I'm so keen on the in-sessional classes. (Rita)
>
> I attended 5 of them, they were good. [...] This course was basically about academic writing, grammar. […] It was helpful and you wanted to sit down and go in internet to download so many things on academic writing. You want to read and to use it as a guide. (Oliver)

As was underlined, these courses focused mainly on structuring an essay, grammar and constructing paragraphs. Students were therefore expected to transfer this knowledge to other disciplinary contexts. Mary was the only student to criticise these sessions (see section 6.2.4).

### 9.4.3 Writing Surgeries

Of the four EAL students who accessed CELTE's support sessions, Rita made the most of opportunities. Alongside the pre- and in-sessional courses, Rita also managed to book one-to-one writing surgeries. She submitted electronically the outline and draft of an

245

assignment and then arranged an appointment with a CELTE tutor who provided

commentary on the submitted texts.

> Firstly I sent him the outline of my work, it is just my points and very clearly and briefly. And after I finish my work, I sent him my draft and he corrected, he revised this on computer […] So I have a mentoring tutor for my written work. So I am so lucky …I felt. And he also gave me a lot of advice and in fact he has proofread this assignment and my proposal for my dissertation.

The focus of the one-to-one writing surgery and of the feedback was extensively on

grammar and assignment presentation. Rita trusted the tutor's commentary in matters of

structure and proofreading. However, she disregarded his advice in matters of content

because the tutor's disciplinary background did not match hers, believing that he was not

qualified to provide this type of advice.

> He concentrated on my language. […] and sentence structure because he has no exact idea about the educational area but he does have idea about how to structure an essay, how to structure it in an organized way.

Interestingly, Rita did not accept the feedback uncritically. She submitted tutor's advice

on how to structure the assignment to scrutiny. Thus, she considered whether the

suggested frame fitted into what was accepted within the department. Rita consulted the

departmental tutors' views on these matters and then finally decided whether to accept

the feedback.

> I find what is interesting that his idea [CELTE tutor] about how to structure a good essay is the same as the professor X. He gave the advice on his session at RA 1....and on that course Pr.X gave us his ideas about how to structure it. I think they have the same opinions.

Rita clearly engaged in an assiduous process of discovering and learning writing

conventions.

## 9.5 Other Literacy Practices

There were numerous seminars organised across the department and university, which Oliver and Rita reported attending them. They indicated to have communicated with more experienced members of the academic community and have acquired new perspectives on disciplinary knowledge.

> I take the active part in some events. For example, during this period I have attended some seminars and workshops. [...] They provide with good resources and good references and the supervisors' network through the institute and university. It is a good opportunity for us to get inspired or motivated. I think that is the vital part for me to keep the confidence. (Rita)

Molly also reported to have had access to a number of opportunities where she interacted with other members of the field, which helped her to access shared values and beliefs of the chosen community.

> ...we got school visits, we got the chance actually to hold a workshop, to run a Chinese workshop for our course mates and also for other PGCE students.

She referred to teaching opportunities she had:

> ...talking to real teachers and students and see what is real teaching problem.

Furthermore, Molly displayed enormous satisfaction with the attendance at an international conference.

> ... that was like really, really amazing because you've seen so many people working in the same field and they have so many interesting ideas, insights and just...just widening my horizon and see 'Wow! We are not so special but we are not alone'.

Overall, Molly valued all these interactions that helped her to gain a growing membership of her discourse community.

...throughout the terms, we've been taught so much how to ....how to negotiate with the policy makers, with the school head teacher that drama is something really important and you know somehow *in the group we do feel a sense of mission that we have to ...to make known to the world that drama is such a good thing.*

These excerpts are consistent with the observation that EAL students valued different sorts of literacy practices that were designed to introduce them to the privileged disciplinary knowledge and writing conventions. However, not all participants managed to assert their membership of their discourse community. Variations among the participants could be partly explained by the nature and the design of the Masters courses they enrolled on. The Drama and Theatre course focused largely on practical workshops led by the programme tutors, tutor assistants, invited guests and students themselves. Crucially, students were set collaborative assignments and teaching schemes. Furthermore, this course was run by two tutors, which might have contributed to a less variation in the course preferences, values and beliefs in contrast to the Educational Studies course that was run by numerous tutors. Moreover, the Educational Studies course provided less group work, no collaborative opportunities and no teacher assistants. Obviously, there were other factors documented that refrained students from asserting their membership of their community. For instance, students' previous writing experiences, their individual differences and their self-regulatory skills impacted on how successfully they participated in these literacy practices.

## 9.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, I explored how EAL students interacted with the training system that included a number of modules, writing assignments and other literacy practices. Clearly, the provision of learning opportunities where students could practise, construct new

disciplinary knowledge and acquire writing conventions enabled them to produce acceptable written work and to develop as writers. However, the process of learning to write was difficult and fraught with tensions, contradictions and misunderstandings. These chapters identified an array of factors that seemed to compromise the success of these literacy practices, which occasionally did not lead to a noticeable improvement in students' academic performance. Instead, they confused students, which in turn engendered erroneous beliefs about academic writing and caused a decrease in students' self-efficacy beliefs. The patterns of changes in students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers will be discussed in the following chapter.

# Chapter 10 – Changes in EAL Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing and of Themselves as Academic Writers

## 10.1 Introduction

This chapter examines change patterns in EAL students' views on academic writing and their self-efficacy beliefs that occurred as a result of engagement with members of the discourse community, institutional artefacts and the training system.

## 10.2 Changes in EAL Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing

EAL students reported engaging in a continuous process of constructing the concept of *academic writing* through complex interactions with members of the discourse community, institutional artefacts and the training system. Findings indicated that at the beginning of the academic year most students tended to be largely concerned with the presentational aspects of their assignments, such as grammatical accuracy, correct referencing, logical structuring and less with the analysis and critique of disciplinary knowledge. Throughout the course, students shifted their focus to the construction of persuasive arguments and critique of disciplinary knowledge. For instance, Hannah

indicated in her first interview that she was not equipped adequately to complete the writing tasks. She reported lacking the necessary writing skills and academic knowledge to function in the new discourse community.

> The Chinese writing is ….too different from English writing.
>
> Our writing is about our feelings. Yes, it is just we read a lot of novels or some works. [...] I feel a little bit trouble to do academic work because my previous knowledge or my previous writing skills are not academic but literary.

Thus, she set out on a journey of discovering and of acquiring the writing norms. At the end of the year, she detailed the concept of academic writing:

> I think academic writing – you should have a logical organization. [...] It should not all about your feeling, it should be about reality. You need to do research. [...] and trying to critique.

This suggests that Hannah expanded her knowledge about what her discourse community valued and moved her construct of academic writing into line with features common to tutors' expectations (see Table 8.1). Yet, these changes occurred just in the end of her extension period. During the whole year, Hannah encountered difficulties in understanding and moving to a growing awareness of the writing conventions.

Molly also experienced changes in her views on *academic writing*. She elaborated on her experiences of writing development:

> I thought 'okay, academic writing is well evidenced, well-proved, well-supported. Now I think you really have to tell something that people haven't thought before, you have to have your own personal stances as well as academic support. [...] And I have to put a higher standard on judgment what a good piece of writing is.

She outlined important changes in her beliefs about the nature of academic writing:

...academic writing is supposed to be boring, and how can you make it engaging? – but this is what I thought before. But now I really think you can write an engaging piece of academic writing. And my professors showed me how, cause they gave me the journals that they got published and they could be really interesting sometimes and they can put in like some kind of jokes, you know, they can make a play of the words.

These excerpts suggest that Molly developed a sophisticated view on writing, embodying knowledge about producing excellent written work.

Findings revealed that Rita also engaged in a process of discovery of the writing conventions. However, she tended to resist the valued writing conventions, preferring instead to share her own opinions and experiences. After experiencing a series of contradictions and failures, Rita came to conceptualise *academic writing* as following:

> I think it [academic writing] is a formal written work and using the academic words, not very popular words. And also it should be structured and very organized and by the support of references, and make good use of references and those literature support. And also you need to make ....you need to make them as much concise and precise as possible. [...] It should be a reflection of what you have learnt and what you have obtained from your studies.

At the end of the year, her concept became aligned with tutors' expectations (see Table 8.1).

In describing the concept of *academic writing*, Oliver acknowledged that his concept had not been challenged much and did not differ from what and how he used to write in his previous academic degrees.

> I think it has to be all round. What I mean by all round – the prepositions, the typing errors, everything has to be good. If everything is good, it makes the essay more readable, sensible. [...] That's more about what you want to write, have an idea of what you are writing. I think that is really important. You are able to organize what I want to write. And other typing thing or those can be improvable as you go along.

The lack of noticeable changes in Oliver's conceptualisation of *academic writing* may be partly explained by his rich previous writing and learning experiences that helped him to write in his current context.

In the light of contextualising (holistic) strategies that enabled me to interconnect the narratives in the context of a coherent whole text (see section 4.5.3), findings suggested that students underwent through different writing developmental stages. At the beginning of the academic year, all students engaged in an *assiduous discovery* of the writing conventions and norms specific to their discourse community. More specifically, students participated in a number of literacy practices provided across the department and university such as the departmental academic writing class, CELTE sessions, tutorials, written and electronic feedback. Additionally, students browsed the online resources, the institutional artefacts and books on academic writing. Importantly, they continued the process of discovery of writing conventions throughout the year. Next, students engaged in *a trial* of both what they perceived to be appropriate for the dominant discourses and their own beliefs, values and academic goals. Afterwards, students interacted with members of the discourse community to receive a *debriefing* on their academic performance and further actions to meet more closely the academic standards. Further, in the light of efficacy information about their competence and of tutors' recommendations, students engaged in a phase of *change* in their perceptions of academic writing and in their writing behaviours. However, these changes did not always produce desired outcomes. Finally, students engaged in a *new trial* of preparation for and completion of writing tasks. Overall, these behavioural patterns were identified

in most participants' writing processes. The only exception was Hannah who did not use feedback for feed forward purposes, undergoing few changes in her writing development. Yet, Hannah reported important transformations in her writing knowledge and skills at the very end of her half-year extension. The process of learning the writing conventions was therefore complex and entailing numerous interactions that impacted on students' self-efficacy beliefs and their course of actions to complete their writing tasks.

## 10.3 Changes in EAL Students' Perceptions of Themselves as Academic Writers

Findings revealed that participants experienced a fluctuation in their self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers. Such factors as grades, tutors' verbal and written comments, observations of peer performances, affective states impacted greatly on participants' perceptions of themselves as writers.

**Table 10.1 Participants' perceptions of themselves as academic writers**

|  | Beginning of the academic year | The end of the academic year |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Hannah** | Beginner | Improver |
| **Mary** | Good | Average |
| **Molly** | Good | Between average and good |
| **Oliver** | Above average | Average |
| **Rita** | Average | Average |

As shown in Table 10.1, there was a variation in students' declared self-efficacy beliefs across the year. Three out of five students claimed a drop in their self-efficacy beliefs as

academic writers. When these students were questioned about their perceptions at the beginning of the year, it was noticeable in their body language and speech inflections that they displayed more confidence about their writing competence than they voiced. According to the perceptible signals, I could say that these students perceived themselves more than *good writers*. Further, one student claimed no changes in her self-efficacy beliefs and only one student experienced an increase in her perceptions of herself as a writer.

More specifically, at the beginning of the course Hannah rated herself as a total beginner who had to engage in discovering the writing conventions specific to the context. She identified her English proficiency as a major problem with her writing.

> ...it is difficult to express my ideas clearly. I really want to tell the tutor or anyone who read my assignment what I want to say but I can't express it clearly. Actually I am worried about this, because …if I write the research in my own language I think I can write better, because I can say clearly [...] but when I write them [in English] I don't think it is good sentence to express.

Throughout interviewing, Hannah reiterated her belief about the constraining effects of her language competence on her academic performance. This was corroborated by tutors' feedback sheets that indicated that Hannah had a major problem in writing clearly.

> The essay is however quite difficult to read and understand in many places because of problems in syntax and sentence construction. (Feedback sheet, HA 2)

> Also, it is ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL for all work to be proof read, preferably by another party, prior to submission (Feedback sheet, HA 5).

In the exit interview, Hannah described herself as an improver who had acquired important knowledge about how to write in the current context, showing an increase in the level of her self-efficacy beliefs.

Oliver considered himself as *a little bit above average*; whereas at the end of his course, he rated himself as:

> I would say average. Because from all the course I had to write, I am average. I have got some Bs, some Cs. Because if you basically divide altogether I am average.

Essentially, Oliver reported developing as an academic learner and polishing his writing skills.

> I cannot say that I didn't improve because you make mistakes and you know people learning every day, you learn from everything, anything you've done, I can say I improved, I have.

At the beginning of the course, Molly had high self-efficacy beliefs; while, in the exit interview she rated herself as:

> Between average and good. […] I wouldn't say I am good.

However, Molly believed that she had developed considerably as a writer.

> I am much better writer. I think the first thing again, based on practice; I can do things much more faster, more efficient now. I understand how to structure an essay. And I ....and I focus more on arguing cases rather than just say what I've read, giving summary of reviewing other stuff.

Molly also reported in her first interview that she had a good command of English and was able to produce grammatically accurate work. Yet, she received a feedback sheet that indicated that she made a considerable number of grammatical errors that cost her points. This feedback challenged her perceptions of her language proficiency. Later in

the year, Molly came to believe that NES had an advantage over EAL students in terms

of English proficiency.

> …they [NES students] can make a play of the words, you know a play of words or sounds and make it kind of fun. And I can't do that. […] I think it [the difference] is more of a language, cause if you can write things very precisely or you know the right words, or you know how to structure, then you feel confident.

In describing her self-efficacy beliefs, Rita indicated that there was no change in her

views, as she regarded herself as an average writer at different time points. She also

identified her language proficiency as a potential barrier in achieving a good academic

performance.

> I think first of all that my difficulty is in language. […] And if I can express my opinions freely in English and use English phrases, idioms so I can feel much easier.

However, in her last interview Rita indicated that English proficiency did not give an

advantage to certain groups of students.

> I don't think I have disadvantage as native speakers. And I even know that even for native speakers they got C too. They don't believe they have so much advantages than non-native.

These findings suggest different change patterns in students' perceptions of themselves

as academic writers at different time points of the year. Some students experienced a

downward pattern, which was probably influenced by the discrepancy between writing

standards and expectations valued in their prior and current degree. As Molly elaborated:

> I haven't got many problems when I was in undergraduate, but masters is different thing. Yes, masters is really a different thing and they really ….they really expect that you write scholarly, professionally. […] ...cause when I was in [my country] among a lot of people I was quite good, that's where from my confidence came from. But here I am using a second language and given that I compare myself to native speakers, which is totally different thing.

Therefore, the self-ratings were contextually-bound, which corroborates the situated learning theory. Despite participants' modest ratings of themselves as academic writers, all five students revealed that they acquired valuable writer's knowledge and skills, disciplinary knowledge and L2 knowledge.

Furthermore, these excerpts revealed some changes in students' assumption about the role of English proficiency in writing. Four out of five students indicated that they had problems with English fluency. Even if Oliver did not indicate that he might have had some issues with language proficiency, a feedback sheet clearly revealed that he tended to make grammatical errors.

> Your work is error-prone and some of the errors appear careless. [...] Make sure that you leave time before submission for a careful proof read of your work, concentrating on known weaknesses. (Feedback sheet, OA 5)

Tutors' beliefs about EAL students' key difficulty in writing corroborated these findings. Four out of five respondents acknowledged that language constituted a potential barrier for EAL students' understanding of the complex academic readings, theories and concepts, which possibly prevented them from achieving their full potential.

> They have to be empowered with a capacity of playing with language conceptualisation, need to have a better command of language as it acts as a barrier to operate with difficult academic readings, concepts, theories (Respondent 1).

Furthermore, respondent 5 suggested that EAL students with poor English fluency were prone to encounter difficulties in tutor-student communication.

> And again there is probably the issue: do they actually understand what I am saying? So, you've got additional issue that is not just a problem that they face in reading, in writing but even coming for an academic writing tutorial. Language can be a barrier to helping them.

In contrast, Respondent 4 believed that language fluency did not play a crucial role in EAL students' academic performance. Although, he acknowledged that it was more likely to affect EAL students' interactions with NES students. However, he contended that both groups of students were at fault with limited communication.

Interestingly, in the end of the year two students expressed the view that English proficiency was not a major problem with their writing. They thought that writing conventions specific to the department encouraged the reformulation approach to writing, which did not require an advanced command of English. On the contrary, Molly came to believe that NES students had an innate advantage over EAL students in having a good command of English. The changes in students' views about the centrality of English fluency seemed to be explained by the values and beliefs specific to their discourse community. For instance, Molly indicated that tutors valued when students played with language to produce an engaging and interesting read, whereas the other students claimed that the tutors praised their engagement with the disciplinary content that did not require sophisticated language competence.

## 10.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, I presented the patterns of change in EAL students' perceptions of academic writing over their course of study. Findings suggested that students constructed and developed their own concepts of academic writing as a result of interactions with members of the discourse community, institutional artefacts and the training system, which became closely aligned with tutors' requirements. Essentially,

these changes occurred at different time points of students' experiences. However, it did not follow that these students always translated the accumulated knowledge into their writing processes successfully.

Besides, this chapter examined the patterns of change in EAL students' self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers. This study revealed that most participants experienced negative changes in their self-efficacy beliefs throughout the course. Only one student held more positive views about her writing competence, while one student did not experience any changes in her perceptions. The changes were probably influenced by the differences between the writing standards and expectations valued in their prior and current academic degree(s). Although, they had lower sense of their own efficacy, they could nevertheless identify aspects in which they had improved. The research findings will be discussed in Chapter 11.

# Chapter 11 – Discussion

## 11.1 Introduction

This chapter interprets the findings presented in the previous chapters 5 – 10 and

addresses the research questions:

> ➢ *How do EAL students' perceptions of academic writing change over their course*
>
> *of study?*
>
> > ▪ *How do EAL students come to understand the academic writing*
> >
> > *conventions and requirements expected by their course?*
>
> ➢ *How do EAL students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers change*
>
> *over their course of study?*
>
> > ▪ *What are the factors that come into play during the course which impact*
> >
> > *on the students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers?*

I present the themes that emerged from the analysis of the case studies and

questionnaires, focusing largely on the social aspects of EAL students' writing. I refer to

the research data and to other empirical and theoretical studies to support my arguments.

This chapter begins with exploring the myriad of factors that influenced students'

understanding of writing conventions valued in their discourse community. It discloses

the challenges faced by students attempting to create meaning in a new intellectual and social context. This is followed by an overview of factors that affected students' self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers. It concludes with the patterns of change in EAL students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers.

## 11.2 Students' Understanding of Writing Conventions

### 11.2.1 Introduction

The current section investigates the research question:

- *How do EAL students come to understand the academic writing conventions and requirements expected by their course?*

Findings indicated that learning to write in HE was an active, interactional and dynamic process, encompassing a range of social and contextual interactions occurring among the novice and more experienced members of the discourse community. Participants drew predominantly on three major interactional events to explore and learn the academic conventions expected by their course (cf. Casanave 1995): *interactions with members of the discourse community* (tutors, peers and teacher-assistants), with *the training system* (taught module courses, writing assignments, academic writing class, CELTE support) and *with institutional artefacts (*samples of previously written work, published guidelines and assessment criteria in the course handbooks). These results mirror a body of studies (Prior 1991; Belcher 1994; Benson & Heidish 1995; Casanave 1995; Schneider & Fugishima 1995; Connor & Kramer 1995; Riazi 1997) that suggested that individual, contextual and social factors came into play and determined how students

learned the writing norms. More specifically, such factors as students' motivation, individual and cultural differences, previous educational and writing experiences, learning strategies, student-tutor relationships, writing tasks, feedback practices, tutors' values and beliefs and other institutional practices appeared to have considerable effect on students' learning to write in a given setting.

Viewed from a sociocultural perspective, these interactions were designed to share the writing conventions, standards, genres, disciplinary knowledge and values with the novices and to enable them to move to a growing participation in their discourse community (Lave & Wenger 1991). Overall, all students expressed satisfaction with the amount and the quality of learning opportunities provided during the academic year. However, they revealed that these interactional events sometimes generated tensions, ambiguities and conflicts between their personal values, beliefs and expectations and what they perceived as privileged in their setting. Whilst acknowledging that these interactions played a varying role in student writing, the research objective was not to gauge and rate the leverage of these factors on student academic performance. The major aim was to explore the factors that students identified as having influenced their views on writing and their self-efficacy beliefs as writers. These factors are detailed in the following sections.

### 11.2.2 Interactions with Members of the Discourse Community: Oral Tutor-Student Communication

Findings revealed that all participants emphasised the importance of formative interactions with more experienced members of the discourse community (i.e. tutors and

teacher-assistants). These interactions came in the form of group provision (e.g. group tutorials, writing workshops, oral presentations and group discussions) and of individualised support (face-to-face tutorials). Students' perceptions that interactions with tutors played a crucial role in their understanding of writing requirements echo findings from previous empirical studies (Goldstein & Conrad 1990; Prior 1991; Casanave 1995; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris 1997; Riazi 1997; Hyland 2000; Hyland & Hyland 2006b; Hyland & Lo 2006) that support the view that communicative opportunities with tutors are central to students learning to write. Moreover, these findings are consistent with the theoretical tenets of situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger 1991) that acknowledge that students who frequently interact with members of the discourse community have greater chances to understand and internalise the shared values and beliefs. Further, this line of argument is supported by some studies that indicated oral feedback can be more effective than written feedback (James 1998). More specifically, EAL students agreed that these interactions were valuable for acquiring writing conventions and requirements and for receiving formative interventions in completing current assignments. Most students reported that this type of communication also enhanced their confidence in the quality of their work and built relationships of collegiality with the academic staff that enabled them to feel at ease in the new context.

It is worth noting that during tutor-student interactions participants did not just seek further information on task requirements; but they often sought a translation of the dominant discourses in language they could understand. Similarly to Bloxham and West's (2007) study, students regarded tutors as mediators between the language of the

academic discipline and their own language and understanding. In particular, students approached tutors to clarify task requirements, tutors' written feedback and writing conventions. Students' need for additional explanation of feedback and/or of guidelines through oral tutor-student interactions challenge the centrality that most institutions place on the provision of written feedback (Bloxham & West 2007) and of published guidelines (Lea & Street 1998; Ivanič *et al.* 2000). Instead, these findings underline the importance of oral tutor-student interactions that can help students to learn writing conventions and to receive valuable formative interventions at the drafting stages (Lea & Street 1998; Hermershmidt 1999; Lillis 1999; Catt & Gregory 2006).

However, this study and the body of research suggested that oral tutor-student communication may actually be deficient in many ways (Goldstein & Conrad 1990; Gibbs 1992; Hyland & Hyland 2006b; Hyland & Lo 2006). Content analysis of student responses uncovered two main aspects of oral feedback considered unhelpful to sustain student learning to write: untimely feedback and the type of language used to provide commentary. Moreover, data analysis identified students' individual differences as a potential difficulty in their active participation in oral tutor-student interactions.

### *Untimely Oral Feedback*

This study suggested that the timing of feedback influenced how students responded to tutors' recommendations. This is also reflected in the literature on assessment (Black & Wiliam 1998; Hartley & Chesworth 2000; Rust 2002; Irons 2008) that indicated that the provision of poorly timed feedback can constrain students' use of tutors' commentary.

On occasions when formative interventions occurred too early in students' preparation and writing processes, they were less ready to engage with them, as they had not decided on the topic or had not read around the area under consideration. In contrast, when tutorials were organised too late, they had had little time to act upon tutors' interventions to improve their written work. Therefore, their revision activities generated few changes, resulting in no substantial improvement. There is no doubt that deciding on the best timing of formative interventions, considering the increase in academic staff' workloads and in student population, can be difficult (Ryan 2000; Ryan & Carroll 2005). This invites further research into the provision of well-timed and constructive formative interventions at university level.

### *The Type of Language to Provide Oral Feedback*

Another factor that compromised the success of tutor-student interaction was the type of language used to provide oral feedback. This echoes the findings of a body of research (Ferris 1997; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris 1997; Hyland & Hyland 2001), which suggested that the employment of indirect language may generate confusion and misunderstanding in EAL students. For instance, participants occasionally misinterpreted the intent of tutors' comments that did not state directly that a revision was needed. Consequently, they disregarded this type of recommendations that resulted in low academic performance. The literature on feedback suggests that EAL students may not be aware that indirectness is employed for politeness in English (Ferris 1997) and for disguising stylistically the power differences between tutors and students (Patthey-Chavez & Ferris 1997). Thus, EAL students are not always in the position to take advantage of these

individualised encounters, as they often fail to understand tutors' comments due to their limited English fluency (Hyland & Lo 2006).

### *Students' Individual Differences*

It has been also suggested that the success of formative interventions depends not only on the ways in which they are provided but also on students' individual differences, beliefs and prior learning experiences which they bring to their course of studies (Belcher 1994; Hyland 2003a; Goldstein 2004; Mu & Carrington 2007). EAL students may encounter difficulties in comprehending tutors' feedback due to individual differences (e.g. linguistic, interactive, comprehension and aural capabilities). These differences may impact on how students participate in literacy practices and how effectively they make use of individual attention. More specifically in this research, Hannah appeared to benefit the least from these learning opportunities. She claimed that her lack of interactive abilities and of prior experiences of such participative encounters, as well as her strong-held beliefs on the tutors' authority, constrained her from interacting and questioning them. This observation is consistent with the findings of some empirical studies (Goldstein & Conrad 1990; Pardoe 2000; Grabe 2001; Hyland & Hyland 2006b; Hyland & Lo 2006) that argued that EAL students do not always benefit from individual attention or small group discussions due to their individual and cultural inhibitions about engaging informally with tutors.

Students' cultural background may influence the way they participate in and respond to feedback practices. Yet, the current research and some authors caution against

approaching EAL writers as a homogenous group in terms of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Watkins & Biggs 1996; Spack 1997; Hyland 2003a; Andrews 2007). The research sample included three East Asian students. However, data analysis did not identify similar patterns of engaging in literacy practices. Instead, they all displayed different participative behaviours. Whilst Hannah was less likely to participate in individualised or small group discussions, Rita displayed a heavy dependence on such support. Molly did not seek individual attention, but she actively engaged with small group discussions and keenly sought peer feedback. This observation corroborates Spack's (1997) proposition that EAL students ought to be regarded as individuals, not only as members of a cultural group. Thus, these findings suggest that the source of difficulty rested more with students' individual differences than with their cultural characteristics.

Furthermore, tutors should not assume that students who lack experiences of engaging in particular literacy practices will be unable to participate in them. The analysis of students' questionnaires and transcripts showed that a considerable number of Masters students had not previously experienced tutor written feedback and peer feedback. Nevertheless, most students tended actively to seek such support in their current Masters programme. This might be explained by their motivation and their highly-competitive academic goals.

This study provides some useful observations that may help tutors to enhance the usefulness of formative interventions. For instance, findings indicated that students who submitted a detailed outline or elaborated a list of questions about their assignments

ahead of tutor-student interactions appeared to engage actively in and benefitted the

most from these opportunities. Tutors also need to provide explicit feedback on what

and how to improve; whereas, students need to know the purposes and the ways these

interactions work. Next, it would be advisable for tutors to check on students'

understanding of the feedback provided and suggest potential strategies to reach the

academic goals. Finally, this study highlighted the need for dialogue not just about

assignments and writing issues, but also about approaches to learning and responding to

feedback. Clearly, these views are consistent with theoretical claims (Vygotsky 1978;

Lave & Wenger 1991) that underline the importance of participative activities to become

a member of a discourse community.

### 11.2.3 Written Feedback

Another crucial aspect that impacted on the ways that students came to understand

writing conventions was the provision of written feedback. Findings indicated that

participants held mixed perceptions of this type of support. All five students reported

that they valued written feedback, emphasising its usefulness in acquiring writing

conventions, tutors' expectations and writing strategies. Indeed, most participants read

carefully the feedback, identified their weaknesses and adjusted their future actions in

response to tutors' suggestions. These findings are consistent with some empirical

studies that suggested that written feedback is a crucial tool for encouraging students'

participation in the academic community and for consolidating their writing skills

(Radeki & Swales 1988; Enginarlar 1993; Hyland & Hyland 2006b; Bloxham & West

2007). These results also challenged the heated debate in HE that suggests that students

are more interested in their grades and pay little attention to comments (Wojstas 1998; Swann & Ecclestone 1999; Hartley & Chesworth 2000; Weaver 2006). For instance, Swann and Ecclestone (1999) showed that some students dismissed the feedback if they disliked the grade, while others seemed concerned only with the grade and did not collect their marked work. Importantly, most students in this study read the written feedback carefully and devised action plans for further improvement.

However, this research showed that students did not always understand and make use of written feedback. This is consistent with empirical studies that suggested that written feedback does not always work (Swann & Ecclestone 1999; Hartley & Chesworth 2000; Weaver 2006). More specifically in this research, there were variations in how much students felt they had understood of comments and how much they had used them to feed forward into subsequent writing. Certainly, if students did not make sense of the tutors' comments, they were more likely to encounter difficulties in adjusting their future actions and to display dissatisfaction and frustration with them. Besides, students sometimes thought that they had understood a comment when they had not. This study indicated that written feedback can be deficient in many ways. Content analysis of student responses revealed three possible sources of difficulty in students' understanding of written feedback: variation in tutors' preferences for assessment criteria, the nature of written feedback and the type of language used to provide written feedback. Moreover, students' self-regulatory skills sometimes constrained their understanding and use of written feedback.

*Students' Self-Regulatory Skills*

Findings revealed that there was a strong tendency among four students to read tutors' feedback carefully and to devise further action plans for writing development. Having read the written feedback, they clearly set objectives for their following assignments and regulated their writing behaviours. These actions addressed a number of writing conventions, such as using the appropriate referencing conventions, using academic language, structuring the chapters, constructing arguments, critiquing and analysing. However, such self-regulatory behaviours were not always successful. For instance, Rita disclosed an overzealous focus on the recommendations from previous work when writing her subsequent assignments, causing her to neglect the task requirements and ultimately resulting in a worse outcome. This observation is consistent with the claims of Zimmerman and Bandura (1994) who argued that students may be aware of self-regulatory skills but they may encounter difficulties in selecting the most appropriate strategies for a given situation.

Unlike other participants, Hannah rarely analysed tutors' commentary to learn the writing conventions and to devise further plans for reaching the standards of her discourse community. In the first term, most students completed a module assignment which included two interconnected writing tasks. The feedback provided on the first assignment encouraged students to read the comments carefully and to act upon them in the next assignment. The analysis of students' accounts and written feedback indicated that these students, including Hannah, used their tutors' commentary to inform the subsequent assignment. Such linked assignments can be regarded as an important way of

introducing students to strategies surrounding the use of and response to written feedback. Hannah, however, failed to transfer this experience to her following assignments. She reported that she was not able to read her feedback for feed forward purposes. Hannah regarded each assignment and feedback as completely different events that did not connect with the next tasks. This was also reflected in the writing strategies and approaches that Hannah adopted to complete the module assignments and the final project. More specifically, she had used spoken language, less signposting and a personal writing style when completing her module assignments, whereas to produce the dissertation she had employed an impersonal writing style, elevated language and signposting. Clearly, Hannah showed poor self-regulatory skills in improving the quality of her assignments.

Students' difficulties in understanding tutor feedback can be partly explained by their limited experiences of having received it in their previous degree(s). The quantitative analysis revealed that a quarter of Masters students had never experienced tutor feedback. In terms of case study students, there was one student who had not received tutor feedback. Additionally, three other students had received tutor feedback only on completing their dissertations. The lack of prior experiences of engaging with feedback practices might have determined how effectively students read and responded to tutor feedback.

*Variation in Tutors' Preferences for Assessment Criteria*

Findings indicated that the transfer of writing knowledge and skills to other assignments was often undermined by variation in tutors' preferences for what counted as good writing. Similarly to Lea and Street's (1998) study, students revealed that what constituted the features of a good assignment were criticised in another assignment. Students felt that tutors provided contradictory feedback on the use of particular vocabulary and on the organisation of assignments, generating frustration and confusion over how to act upon it. Consequently, some students concluded that marking depended on tutors' personal preferences rather than on the academic standards valued in their community.

Students also reported a variance in tutors' weightings of such assessment criteria as organisation, grammatical accuracy, mechanical errors and incorrect referencing. They reported that some tutors did not penalise for grammatical errors or incorrect referencing, while others harshly criticised this type of errors. These findings are consistent with other research (Lea & Street 1998; Ivanič *et al.* 2000; Read *et al.* 2005) that supported the view that there is considerable variation in tutors' preferences and weightings of assessment criteria.

Furthermore, one student attributed the variations in tutors' marking not only to personal preferences but also to gender and age. However, the impact of the gender and age of the marker on the assessment of assignments remains unclear in the literature. For instance, Read *et al.'s.* (2005) study showed no significant gender distinction among a group of

fifty assessors. The limited research on these matters invites further investigation into how gender and age impacts on tutors' preferences for assessment criteria.

### *The Nature of Written Feedback*

Another source of difficulty for understanding of written feedback was the provision of vague and general commentary with little or no detailed reference to students' weaknesses, strengths and reasons behind specific comments and recommendations. Such comments sometimes engendered confusion over the quality of the written texts and possible action plans for improving students' writing skills. Furthermore, the nature of comments sometimes generated confusion concerning the appropriateness of the grade when it appeared to be incompatible with tutor's comments. On these occasions, students tended to seek their own explanations to justify the comments and the grades. For instance, Molly received a short, general commentary coupled with a high grade that did not reveal explicitly where she succeeded in producing a persuasive argument or an excellent critique. This prompted her to believe that the discrepancy between the comments and grade was because of the tutor's leniency. Mary received two feedback sheets where short, critical commentary was coupled with high grades, which made her assume that the difference between the comments and grades was due to the tutors' desire to encourage her. These results suggest that students sought clear explanations of what exactly went well and where they managed to be critical and/or persuasive. Moreover, they revealed that feedback sometimes included contradictory information on assessment criteria, which did not help them to make sense of the standards valued in their discourse community. Clearly, students struggled with learning and internalising

the writing conventions, pointing out that they often adopted a trial and error approach to their writing.

***The Type of Language to Provide Written Feedback***

It has also been suggested that the language used to provide feedback affects the way in which students interpret written feedback (Ivanič *et al*. 2000; Hyland & Hyland 2001). Indeed, students often needed additional verbal clarification to make sense of implicit, vague, or confusing messages about what and how they were supposed to write. Thus, they either turned to their tutors or peers for further aid in interpreting the written feedback. These findings support previous empirical studies (Lillis 1999; Swann & Ecclestone 1999; Weaver 2006; Bloxham & West 2007) that revealed that assessment language is not seen as transparent by students and further interactions with more experienced members are regarded as crucial to their understanding of written feedback. Thus, tutors need to find ways to help students to make sense of the feedback and to feed it forward in subsequent writing, leading to a noticeable improvement in student competence. Essentially, the familiarity of these standards cannot be gained in a single session, or with a handout. Students need access to ongoing learning opportunities that will help them in the long run to move to a growing understanding of assessment practices (Hartley & Chesworth 2000).

### *11.2.4 Electronic Feedback*

Another disciplinary practice that served as a means of interacting with members of the discourse community and of gaining access to academic knowledge was electronic

275

feedback. Most students revealed that electronic feedback enabled them to clarify the task requirements and the key concepts, negotiate the choice of assignment topic, seek guidance in searching for resources and receive formative feedback on their writing. Furthermore, most students engaged in continuous electronic communication with their dissertation supervisors that helped them to construct new meanings, receive formative interventions and ensure the progress and timely submission of their dissertation.

Despite a growing increase in the employment of technologies in teaching and learning, there is a limited number of studies that have addressed the effects of tutors' feedback provided through electronic means on EAL students' revision processes of disciplinary-based assignments (Goldstein 2006). Goldstein indicated that empirical studies suggested that tutors' electronic feedback on students' drafts played a relatively minor role in how students revised them subsequently. The scarcity of empirical evidence on electronic feedback demands further research on the use and the reasons that make its impact limited.

The current study did not identify issues that were exclusive to this type of provision. Similarly to oral and written feedback, factors such as the type of language used to provide commentary, the length and nature of comments and students' individual differences impacted on how successful students were in understanding and internalising the electronic feedback. The only advantages of this feedback over the others were that it enabled students to reach their tutors quickly and to receive timely and individualised feedback. Students also reported employing the email feedback and synchronous electronic communication, such as MSN, to seek peers' assistance when writing

assignments. However, electronic feedback also posed difficulties for students who were less familiar with the use of electronic technologies. For instance, Rita acknowledged that she found it difficult to operate Microsoft Word applications such as accepting or ignoring the inserted comments.

Essentially, this study suggests that tutor feedback practices, irrespective of the form they took, played a crucial role in students learning to write. Clearly, most students engaged eagerly in different feedback practices when learning to write. This study, however, suggested that assessment language is often impenetrable to students. When students could not make sense of the task requirements or tutors' written comments they arranged individual tutorials. Alternatively, they employed small group tutorials or electronic communication to clarify and seek further information on the module guidelines, samples and tutors' expectations. These observations support the theoretical claims about the use of participative practices in the HE context that can enable students to engage in meaning-making processes and to gain a growing participation in their discourse community (Vygotsky 1978; Lave & Wenger 1991). Nevertheless, this study cautioned that a high level of support does not always guarantee desired outcomes. It follows that tutors need to be careful how they construct these opportunities and how they word the comments, so that students benefit from them.

### 11.2.5 Interactions with Peers

Another factor that contributed to students' understanding of writing conventions and norms was interactions with peers. The analysis of student questionnaires revealed that

less than a quarter of Masters students held neutral perceptions of the value of peer feedback. Additionally, less than a fifth of respondents considered it ineffective. All five case study students initially displayed negative views of the value of peer interactions. Students stated that peers tended to respond to surface problems and mechanical errors at the expense of more meaningful issues, providing less constructive advice than tutors' feedback. These results corroborated a body of empirical studies that challenged the effectiveness of peer feedback on student writing (Nelson & Murphy 1992; Connor & Asenavage 1994; Zhang 1995; Nelson & Carson 1998; Zhu 2001). These perceptions of the effectiveness of peer feedback are not exactly consistent with theoretical claims (Vygotsky 1978; Flower & Hayes 1980; Liu & Hansen 2002) that advocated peer feedback as a formative, developmental process that provides writers with opportunities to discuss their writing, discover other interpretations of their texts and extend each other's learning.

Findings indicated that the Masters courses provided several formal peer support mechanisms (i.e. oral presentations, small group tutorials) that offered students an opportunity to share their written work and to receive peer feedback. Nevertheless, students indicated that their colleagues participated little in these encounters and supplied little advice. Even when they received peer feedback, students reported that they had not always adopted their suggestions. This corroborates the findings of previous empirical studies (Connor & Asenavage 1994; Villamil & De Guerrero 1996; Nelson & Carson 1998; Paulus 1999; Tsui & Ng 2000).

Importantly, the current research showed that EAL students underwent substantial changes in their views on the effectiveness of peer feedback during the academic year. Once students started to write their first assignments they started to seek more often their colleagues' opinions and support. All five participants valued the informal peer support mechanisms (Hyland, F. 2000). More specifically, students reported turning to peers and friends for support in clarification and understanding of task requirements, editing and proofreading of written work, searching for reading materials, designing and conducting of their micro-studies. Additionally, towards the end of the year students displayed more positive views about peer interactions. These findings are consistent with several empirical studies (Hyland, F. 2000; Bloxham & West 2007) that suggested how much students valued spontaneous peer conversations while they wrote their assignments.

The most impressive changes occurred in Molly's perceptions of peer feedback. A distinctive feature of Molly's course was the use of collaborative work that entailed students performing and working together on devising and teaching drama schemes in schools. These activities encouraged students to create a supportive environment that was characterised by a dynamic and ongoing communication between EAL and NES students. The collaborative events, coupled with informal peer interactions, impacted considerably on Molly's trust and views about the effectiveness of the peer feedback. She clearly viewed her peers as important in constructing and gaining access to academic knowledge. Her perceptions that interactions with peers had facilitated her growing participation in literacy activities were supported by situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger 1991) and Vygotsky's (1978) concept of ZPD (see section 2.2.3),

which argued that an individual can learn to extend his/her current competence through the guidance of more capable peers.

It is important to mention that both tutors and students should not underestimate peers' abilities to provide valuable advice. Some students were better equipped and positioned to make sense of the implicit and explicit knowledge than others. Therefore, peer interactions sometimes facilitated students' understanding of the writing conventions and requirements they found it difficult to make sense of. Essentially, Masters students constituted a culturally, socially and educationally diverse pool of resources that if harnessed adequately could contribute to a productive and enriching interaction among different categories of students (i.e. novice and more experienced members of a discourse community, EAL and NES students).

The value of employing peer feedback and collaborative activities was discussed in previous studies on assessment (Black & Wiliam 1998; Beaufort 2000; Northedge 2003; Rust *et al.* 2003, 2005). These studies summarise many potential cognitive, linguistics and social benefits that these strategies can entail. Beaufort (2000) suggested that they may be useful to promote reflective thinking among students that can produce higher quality writing. Nevertheless, these literacy practices should not be regarded as a substitute for formative tutor interventions in student writing. Northedge (2003) argues that tutors need to monitor group discussions, as they can easily be pitched too low, meaning students continue to use an everyday discourse and make no progress towards the shared values and language of the more experienced members of the discourse community. Alternatively, these interactions can be pitched too high, so that few

students can genuinely participate in them. The transcripts showed that there was a lot of tutors' and teacher-assistants' interventions in the collaborative schemes in which Molly engaged.

This study suggested, therefore, that there is a need for careful planning when embarking on peer feedback. Firstly, tutors should introduce students to the purposes of peer feedback, so that they understand how these interactions work and how they can help them. Secondly, tutors should encourage students to participate in such activities through setting collaborative or small group work to enhance students' trust in each other's capabilities and knowledge. Tutors should also monitor peer interactions and provide support when it is needed. These suggestions are consistent with the literature on assessment (Black & Wiliam 1998; Brooks 2002).

## 11.3 Interactions with Institutional Artefacts

Other important interactional events that came into play and impacted on how EAL students made sense of the academic conventions were the interactions with institutional artefacts (samples of written work, published guidelines and assessment criteria available in the course handbooks). The next sections consider the practices and issues surrounding students' interactions with institutional artefacts designed to provide access to the task requirements and writing standards.

### 11.3.1 Published Guidelines

The use of departmental guidelines to support student writing is often criticised for adopting a technical approach to writing, focusing on issues of language form, grammar,

punctuation, spelling, referencing and warnings about plagiarism (Stierer 2000). Furthermore, the module guidelines lack consistency or consensus about the disciplinary knowledge expected in student writing (Shay 2008). Shay argues that current literacy practices have concealed whether disciplinary knowledge or knowledge-making practices are being judged. Accordingly, the unwillingness to make explicit the requirements of the privileged disciplinary knowledge suggests that either academic staff did not give consideration to this aspect or they did not perceive important to make them transparent to students (Stierer 2000). Empirical studies suggested that this approach to introducing guidelines does not help students to understand and present disciplinary knowledge for a particular module (Lea & Street 1998; Hermerschmidt 1999; Lillis 1999; Stierer 2000; Catt & Gregory 2006).

Findings indicated that Masters students were provided with guidelines published in the module handbooks, which differed in terms of length and specificity. Most module handbooks contained information on referencing, warnings about plagiarism, assessment criteria and task requirements. A number of them provided additional information about assignment structure, major headings and core references. Most students expressed satisfaction with the latter type of guidelines. They reported that more detailed guidelines served as a valuable means to introduce them to writing conventions and requirements.

The apparent inconsistency between this study and the abovementioned empirical findings is probably explained by the narrow technical approach adopted in these studies. Besides, they indicated that HE institutions placed a heavy importance on the

provision of summative feedback and guidelines to familiarise novices with the dominant discourses (Lea & Street 1998; Hermerschmidt 1999; Lillis 1999; Stierer 2000; Catt & Gregory 2006). This observation suggests that the exclusive reliance on guidelines, especially narrow technical guidelines and summative feedback, may not produce the desirable outcomes. Students need various types of learning opportunities, so that they can internalise the privileged discourses. Indeed, participants in this study used guidelines as an initial step in the process of discovering the conventions and expectations. Next, all students referred to tutors, peers and samples of previous years' work to reinforce their acquired knowledge and to apply it to their own writing.

Findings indicated that some students ignored published recommendations. For instance, a great deal of guidelines advised students specifically to relate their assignments to the materials learned on the courses and to the module reading list. Nevertheless, the feedback sheets revealed that these students occasionally referred to other materials and reading lists when completing current assignments. They often chose to contextualise their assignments in their native educational systems, which prompted the heavy use of the materials published in their own countries or of their own resources. Most importantly, a couple of students appeared to misinterpret the importance of using the recommended reading lists. Thus, this approach to selecting bibliography often compromised the quality of their writing.

These findings echo the view that tutors' judgement about the quality of written texts is based on students' use of disciplinary knowledge (Shay 2008). This assertion is corroborated by several feedback sheets, which praised or criticised students' use of

relevant theories and module reading lists. Yet, not all students recognised tutors' feedback on using the module reading lists as strong requirements, mistakenly failing to take it into account when writing the next assignments. This observation suggests that tutors need to be more explicit about the rationale for using a particular bibliography and disciplinary knowledge. Essentially, they should reiterate these conventions throughout the module sessions and written feedback, so that students come to understand the centrality of incorporating the dominant disciplinary knowledge. This proposition is supported by Molly, who reported that on numerous occasions tutors underlined particular references to be used in specific assignments. Additionally, tutors indicated in feedback sheets whether she had managed to make use of disciplinary knowledge or not. These practices helped Molly to become aware of the repertoires of dominant disciplinary knowledge.

### 11.3.2 Published Assessment Criteria

Findings showed that there was a discrepancy between tutors' and students' perceptions of the value of assessment criteria. Most tutors in the current research stated that the articulation of assessment criteria constituted a valuable tool for student learning. This mirrors the literature on assessment criteria that advocates that the communication of assessment criteria may exert a powerful influence on student learning and curriculum improvement (Gibbs 1992; Black & Wiliam 1998). Nevertheless, one tutor argued that the explicit communication of assessment criteria was not necessarily helpful to students. This line of argument was supported by results that emerged from student interviews. Students either did not refer to the assessment criteria or they found them

impenetrable or restraining for their writing processes. Thus, the explicit assessment criteria and grade descriptors failed to transfer the knowledge on assessment standards to students. These findings reflect a number of studies that reported that there is little evidence to suggest the explicit presentation of assessment criteria and grade descriptors contributes to students' learning of assessment standards and norms (Rust *et al.* 2003, 2005; Bloxham & West 2007; Shay 2008; Russell *et al.* 2009).

These contradictory findings had their roots in several problems with the way in which the departmental assessment criteria were understood and conveyed to students. Firstly, the assessment criteria did not indicate weighting, i.e. the comparative importance of one criterion in relation to other criteria (Shay 2008). Consequently, different tutors appeared to have varying priorities when marking an assignment, as already discussed in previous sections of this chapter. Secondly, the assessment criteria did not include benchmarks or exemplification materials, explicating what different criteria might mean. A tutor in this study supported this view, claiming that the assessment criteria should be cross-referenced with exemplification materials on description, analysis, evaluation and critique. Empirical studies showed that such criteria as analysis, criticality and persuasive argumentation may bear different interpretations in different contexts that may add more confusion and frustration to students' writing experiences (Lea & Street 1998; O'Donovan *et al.* 2004).

Essentially, recent research (Rust 2002; Rust *et al.* 2003, 2005; O'Donovan *et al.* 2004; Bloxham & West 2007; Shay 2008) argues that an over-reliance on explicit communication of assessment criteria is not sufficient to develop a shared understanding

of assessment knowledge between staff and students. An assiduous focus on the articulation of assessment criteria may paradoxically encourage students to adopt a strategic approach to learning, perceiving assessment tasks as obstacles to overcome in the pursuit of grades (Norton 2004; O'Donovan *et al.* 2004; Bloxham & West 2007; Greasley & Cassidy 2010). More specifically, students who are performance-oriented may strategically focus on assessment requirements and on seeking clues to tutors' preferences to improve their marks rather than engaging in holistic learning and self-development (Kaplan & Flum 2010). Despite the departmental provision of assessment criteria, most students did not manage to make full sense of the criteria and to apply them to their own assignments.

A body of research (Rust *et al.* 2003, 2005; O'Donovan *et al.* 2004; Shay 2008) calls for opportunities for active engagement with the assessment criteria. It has been suggested that marking exercises where students use the criteria in marking samples of work and then discuss it both with other students and tutors (Rust *et al*. 2003), as well as peer marking of actual student work (Rust 2002; Ellery 2008) have been shown a statistically significant improvement in the quality of student text. Essentially, this improvement may last over time and be transferable, at least within similar contexts (Rust *et al.* 2003; 2005). Accordingly, literacy practices based on dialogue, imitation, feedback, discussion, one-to-one or small group basis may therefore develop a shared understanding of assessment criteria and a growing participation in the literacy practices of the discourse community. As Sadler (1989, p.121) concluded:

> The indispensable conditions for improvement are that the student comes to hold a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher, is able to monitor continuously the quality of what is being produced during the act of production itself.

These practices fit well the framework of situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger 1991). Nevertheless, it has been acknowledged that these approaches may be difficult to implement, if not impossible, in the context of today's rapid expansion of student population and cuts in university resources (Ryan 2000; Rust *et al*. 2003; Carroll & Ryan 2005).

### *11.3.3 Samples of Previous Years' Written Work*

Another factor that impacted on the ways students made sense of writing conventions and requirements was the provision of previous years' written assignments and dissertations. Most students indicated that these were particularly helpful for understanding the genre conventions and tutors' expectations. Additionally, they illustrated important information about the structure, organisation of materials and technical conventions such as the length of the chapters and referencing. However, literature suggests that there is a risk with supplying samples of written texts to students, as they may adopt a strategic approach to emulating them without actively engaging in meaning-making (Norton 2004). More specifically, students may believe that these samples are standard essays that they have to reproduce if they want to succeed. Students may also become dependent on such support and be unable to act independently when they are not presented with samples. Yet, research participants appeared to be aware of the risks involved in merely replicating the samples. Indeed, a couple of students emphasised that samples had helped them to understand writing

conventions and had warned them against basic errors, rather than offering them exemplars of successful writing.

Importantly, this study underlines the value of samples to heighten students' understanding of writing conventions and assessment process. On occasions when students did not see any samples and produced poor assignments, they expressed their wish for such support that could have helped them to better understand tutors' expectations and genre features. Similarly to other forms of provision, tutors need explicitly to inform students about the purposes of such samples and provide strategies and advice on how to make use of them. Students need to understand that these artefacts constitute important opportunities for familiarising themselves with the writing conventions and for challenging their own writing knowledge and beliefs that they brought to their studies.

## 11.4 Interactions with Training System

Another important interactional event that came into play and influenced how EAL students understand the academic conventions was interactions with the *training system* (taught module courses, writing assignments, academic writing class, CELTE support). The following sections address the practices and issues surrounding students' interactions with the training system designed to provide access to the writing conventions and disciplinary knowledge.

### 11.4.1 Taught Module Courses

Findings showed that modules constituted important opportunities for students to engage in meaning-making. This reflects a body of empirical studies (Prior 1991; Casanave 1995; Riazi 1997) that suggested that taught courses enabled students to learn not only disciplinary knowledge but also valuable writing knowledge. All the modules that the participants attended provided a number of literacy practices intended to support their writing. Seen from the perspective of situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger 1991), the discourse community created spaces where students could access legitimately the disciplinary knowledge and writing conventions. More specifically, all five students valued modules that incorporated seminars, oral presentations, guest talks, group discussions, practical activities and reading materials. These opportunities enabled them to gradually develop a better understanding of disciplinary knowledge and a growing participation in the discourse community. In contrast, modules that provided fewer opportunities to engage in discussion and construction of disciplinary knowledge, but offered more practical activities (e.g. role play, games), were criticised as failing to help students to link their assignments to the disciplinary concepts. Additionally, students believed that modules taught by various tutors compromised their understanding of writing conventions, as tutors brought varying viewpoints and expressed different preferences for writing conventions. This highlights the research findings that indicated that there was an inconsistency in tutors' preferences for assessment criteria.

Findings suggested that frequent individual tutorials or small group sessions to support student writing did not guarantee them high achievements. For instance, as part of one

module two students experienced a range of learning opportunities such as individualised tutorials, electronic feedback, peer feedback and oral presentation (see RA5 in Appendix 7.1 and OA5 in Appendix 7.2). However, there was no discernable improvement in students' grades compared to other modules that provided less support for assignment writing. More specifically, one student received a similar result as in other assignments, whereas the other student failed her assignment. This observation reinforces the view that there is insufficient evidence to indicate that individualised or small group tutorials offer significant opportunities for dialogue and meaning-making, which may result in higher academic achievements (Rust *et al.* 2005).

Molly's case is of interest, as she held more positive perceptions of the value of the module courses than other participants. She reported that her Masters course provided a diversity of formal and informal events. She asserted that such practices as informal gatherings with tutors, conference, workshops run by students themselves and performances offered her opportunities to share the values, beliefs and knowledge particular for her discourse community. Findings showed that these participative activities enabled Molly to build a sense of belonging to the chosen community. Indeed, she seemed to assert her membership of her discourse community, while the other participants acknowledged developing as academic writers but they did not feel they had become accomplished members of their discourse community.

Importantly, findings suggested that some students failed to engage with the disciplinary knowledge introduced in the modules while completing writing assignments. For instance, just two students described moving actively back and forth between the module

contents and writing processes to inform their writing decisions. Whenever they faced a problem in their writing, they consciously referred to module topics, reading lists and tutors' feedback to solve it. This indicates that these students were aware of the importance of taking on the knowledge, beliefs and values of their discourse community. I do not suggest that the other students did not adopt the disciplinary knowledge, but I note that some students did not consciously and purposefully refer to taught content as a strategy for learning to write and for completing a writing assignment. Indeed, tutors often criticised these students for failing to embed disciplinary knowledge in their writing.

Given that, this research suggests that EAL students may need advice on understanding the purposes, expectations and planned outcomes of the literacy practices before they engage with them. This statement is consistent with a body of literature on teaching international students (Ryan 2000; Carroll & Ryan 2005) and on assessment (Brooks 2002; O'Donovan *et al*. 2004; Weaver 2006). Students need to internalise the value and learning strategies of socially interacting with other members of the discourse community and being able to use such events for their benefits. However, there is a risk that an explicit communication of the purposes and strategies for participation may not make indeed a difference. It does not follow that repeated explanation of everything to students is either possible or helpful. Besides, students will need time and experience to internalise such guidance (Carroll 2005).

### 11.4.2 Writing Assignments

Writing assignments constituted important events that enabled students to construct disciplinary and writers' knowledge. This supports a number of previous empirical studies (Prior 1991; Casanave 1995; Riazi 1997) that showed that writing tasks were key tools to introduce students to the disciplinary frameworks and the learning skills needed in their future careers. Findings indicated that research participants completed different types of writing such as research proposals, micro-studies, reports, essays, dissertations, power point presentations, quantitative and qualitative analyses. This echoes the findings of empirical research (Stierer 2000; Ganobcsick-Williams 2004) that suggested the students in HE produce writing in a very wide range of genre categories.

Most students endeavoured to employ their previous writing experiences, interests, values and motivations when completing the current assignments. Thus, they reinterpreted the task objectives encompassing educational, personal and professional perspectives, such as acquiring valuable knowledge for their future career, completing the course assignment, extending their knowledge about topics they were interested in and researching topics that were relevant to their personal experiences. Making the tasks personalised to their needs and interests increased their intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy beliefs that helped them when facing difficulties or setbacks in writing. Therefore, students preferred authentic assignment tasks that enabled them to acquire valuable knowledge for their future career. This fits with research (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987; Rust 2002) that suggested students greatly value authentic writing tasks.

It has been suggested that participants used either the challenge or reformulation approach to constructing academic knowledge (see section 2.6.4). Students chose between these approaches depending largely on the nature of task requirements, their confidence in disciplinary knowledge and previous experience gained in the field under discussion. More specifically, when students were totally new to the subject with no previous experience, they employed the reformulation approach. They also preferred this approach when they were not familiar with the genre of writing they were assigned. In contrast, when students had extensive knowledge and a personal interest in the topic they preferred to opt for the challenge approach. It is worth mentioning that all five students employed both approaches across their writing experiences.

Findings showed that these approaches to writing determined students' writing behaviours. When students opted for challenge approach they seemed to merge the course aims with their personal needs and their broader cultural contexts. They regarded the academic texts as challenges to their own interpretations and a starting point for more reflexive engagement with their own learning. However, from tutors' perspective these students occasionally failed to produce necessary disciplinary content and terminology. These findings are consistent with Lea's (1998) study, which indicated that tutors frequently regarded this type of writing as incoherent and unstructured, failing to prove that students had assimilated the disciplinary content.

In contrast, when students adopted a reformulation approach to completing assignments, they interpreted the writing task as replicating the original academic texts and conceding to the authority of the course materials. In these cases, students were more likely to use

relevant terminology and theoretical themes in their writing. However, the literature suggested that such an approach to constructing knowledge may disengage students from committing firmly to the epistemological issues underpinning their course of studies (Lea 1998). More details about the changes in students' writing behaviours and approaches to writing will be explored in the following sections.

Interestingly, a couple of students expressed their wish for more writing tasks and module courses that would have granted them full access to the disciplinary knowledge and writing conventions. They suggested that five or six assignments were insufficient to considerably improve as a writer and learner. This echoes Rust's (2002) study that argued that four or five assignments did not help students to identify their strengths and weaknesses as writers and to make secure improvements to their writing skills. These findings emphasise the centrality of the discourse community and opportunities it creates for the novices to gain access to its knowledge and conventions and move from peripheral to full participation.

### 11.4.3 CELTE

The University provided EAL students with ongoing help, training and advice in all areas of academic language learning through CELTE. Students displayed mixed views about this provision. On one hand, they indicated that they had learned important academic knowledge. On the other hand, Mary reported that she had encountered difficulties in transferring this knowledge to her discipline-based assignments, as these sessions were designed for students across different departments and subjects.

These findings are not a surprise. A number of studies have criticised the skills study programmes that seem to have little effects on EAL students' learning and their disciplinary writing (Leki & Carson 1997; Lea & Street 1998; Spack 1998; Baynham 2000). Generally, this provision is criticised for offering a narrow perspective on writing techniques, focusing on superficial features of texts such as structuring an essay, punctuation, grammar and referencing that are expected to be transferred to other disciplinary contexts (Baynham 2000). Given that, it is likely that students who take these courses may conclude that applying the prescribed rules on the mechanics of text will help them to produce good work. Another criticism is rooted in the academic writing instruction that tends to ignore the complexity and discipline-specificity of academic writing, so that it becomes decontextualised and students struggle with transferring the acquired skills to their specific discipline (Leki & Carson 1997; Spack 1998). However, these findings do not devalue the CELTE support. The present study indicated that some students found some CELTE courses helpful for offering insights into important grammatical norms, in structuring assignments and paragraphs. Indeed, most EAL students needed additional help with important aspects of academic language learning. Essentially, this study highlights the idea that such provision on its own is not sufficient to introduce EAL students to writing conventions.

At the beginning of the year, the department offered Masters students an academic writing class. Findings showed that in long-term students found this class useful to learn writing conventions and strategies. However, it was difficult to draw any conclusions or to compare its value to the CELTE provision, as only two students had attended this

295

class. According to the quantitative data, the low attendance at this class might be explained partly by students' views on the effectiveness of academic writing class. Thus, one third of respondents reported having neutral or negative perceptions of the centrality of attending academic writing sessions to student writing. This is supported by the interview accounts of one participant who had not attended this class because she did not believe that it was important to her writing development. Besides, the majority of respondents had never experienced an academic writing class, so they might have been unable to judge its usefulness. Interestingly, the questionnaire respondents who considered themselves good writers were more likely to think that attending sessions on academic writing was crucial for writing academically. These results suggest that some students may be unaware of the importance of literacy practices to writing development. Therefore, tutors need to encourage students to make the most of the literacy practices provided by their institution.

### 11.4.4. Conclusions

The current section addressed the research question about how EAL students came to understand the writing conventions and requirements expected by their course. This study revealed a range of interactions that students engaged with as part of their programme. These interactional events were designed to introduce them to relevant disciplinary knowledge and writing conventions. Findings suggested that feedback practices had a powerful leverage on students' learning and writing. In addition, such literacy practices as the interactions with institutional artefacts, the training system and with peers heightened their understanding of academic knowledge. These findings

emphasised the unquestionable importance of social and contextual interactions to encourage student to feel as experts in their community (Petelin 2010).

Despite the documented positive perceptions of the role of these literacy practices on student writing, it has been suggested that they also compromised their understanding of writing conventions, often constraining their participation to the periphery of the community. This study outlined a number of problems surrounding these encounters and recommended possible strategies to enhance their effects on student writing. In particular, it appeared that there was a great deal of implicit academic knowledge embodied in the literacy practices. For instance, students struggled with making sense of and internalising the departmental assessment criteria. They also encountered difficulties in their understanding of the purposes and of the rules of participation in the literacy practices. Besides, findings indicated that there was a variation in tutors' preferences for assessment criteria across the department, which confused students. Andrews (2007) suggests that if students do not fully understand the subject framework with its political, social and conventional aspects, then they are unlikely to be able to fulfil their course requirements. Essentially, this situation is currently no longer acceptable within current contexts where an increasing number of students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds enter HE.

More specifically in this study, findings showed that students enrolled for Masters Taught courses at WIE typically came from a wide variety of educational and cultural backgrounds and they brought different prior writing experiences. Although the majority of students indicated that they had written academically quite often, they tended to have

received a limited preparation for writing academically within HE context. In particular, an overwhelming majority claimed to have never experienced academic writing class. Over one third of respondents had never received peer feedback; whereas, over one quarter had never experienced tutor feedback. Besides, a great deal of students had not produced statistical presentations, critique, thesis, reports and literature review, which constituted the key types of writing in their discourse community. This clearly impacted on how they participated in and took advantage of the current literacy practices.

This situation has implications for the departmental agenda in the teaching and learning of academic writing. These findings call for participative and dialogic interventions for heightening EAL students' participation in their discourse community. Additionally, positive learning contexts and transparency in writing conventions may increase students' academic performance. Indeed, the literature on the relationship between students' attitudes, expectations and academic performance in writing (Prosser & Trigwell 1999; Biggs *et al.* 2001; Biggs 2003; Ellis & Calvo 2004; Ellis *et al.* 2004, 2005) indicated that such factors as students' positive perceptions of the learning context, of viewing writing assignments as learning opportunities and the clarity of goals and standards were significantly and positively related to higher quality outcomes of student writing.

## 11.5 EAL Students' Perceptions of Themselves as Academic Writers

### 11.5.1 The Sources of Self-efficacy Information about EAL Students' Writing Capabilities

This section addresses the research question:

- *What are the factors that come into play and impact on the students' self-efficacy as academic writers during their course of study?*

To answer this question, this study drew on Bandura's (1986) framework for the sources of self-efficacy information (see section 2.2.4). The framework suggested that there was a host of sources of knowledge that seemed to have some effects on students' self-efficacy beliefs. These were: enactive attainments, vicarious experiences of observing the performances of peers; verbal persuasion and social influence and physiological states from which students could judge their capability, strength and vulnerability to tensions.

### *Enactive Attainments and Verbal Persuasion and Social Influence*

Findings indicated that the most influential sources of students' efficacy information were enactive attainments and verbal persuasion and social influence that were communicated through tutors' feedback. More specifically, tutor oral and written feedback had a strong impact on students' self-efficacy beliefs and on their sense of worth. This finding supports empirical studies that argue that feedback carries not only messages about writing conventions (Riazi 1997; Hyland & Hyland 2006b) but also about students' identity as a writer, their competence and even character (Ivanič 1998;

299

Lea 1998; Ivanič *et al.* 2000). The way in which tutors word the comments may often heighten the differential power relation between tutor and student (Ivanič *et al.* 2000), reinforcing the belief that tutors are superior to students and they are the gatekeepers to the right answers on the discussed topics. Accordingly, students tend to accept the authority of tutors because they know that tutors have the support of their institution to pass or fail them (Hyland, F. 2000). Consequently, the ways in which students interpret the feedback may have a strong effect on their writing behaviours and views about themselves as writers (Ivanič *et al.* 2000).

In interacting with tutors, students looked for efficacy information about their writing skills. These observations are consistent with the findings that emerged from student questionnaire, suggesting that students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers correlated with how tutors evaluated them as writers. Accordingly, there was a strong positive relationship and a high significance between what students thought about themselves as writers and how others viewed them as writers. Thus, students who considered themselves as good writers were more likely to be viewed as good writers by their tutors and peers.

Findings indicated that most case study participants interpreted tutors' negative comments not just as comments to individual assignments but as indicative of their personal ability or worth as a student. Both oral and written feedback resulted in students constantly revising their beliefs about their own capabilities to master particular writing conventions. Typically, students' successes raised their efficacy appraisals, whereas repeated failures lowered them. Consequently, most students displayed varying self-

efficacy beliefs, rating themselves as either good, or mediocre, or poor writers at different points of the year. These shifts in their perceptions of themselves as writers influenced how much effort and time they had invested in tasks, how long they had persevered when confronting obstacles or failures and how much stress or depression they had experienced when endeavouring to meet readers' expectations. Additionally, these self-evaluations were accompanied by negative emotional states that will be detailed in the following sections.

These findings are noteworthy because they raise questions about the way tutors provide feedback and the way students interpret it. Clearly, tutors should consider what messages their feedback conveys. Preferably, tutors should help EAL students to adjust to a new setting where the assessment criteria and writing conventions might be different from their previous academic course(s). Further, tutors' feedback should enhance students' sense of membership of the discourse community rather than emphasising their peripheral role, or even worse, excluding them from the community (Ivanič *et al.* 2000). Consequently, the quality of feedback is crucial if tutors aim to develop effective learning processes (Black & Wiliam 1998).

### *Vicarious Experiences of Observing the Performances of Peers*

Another important factor that provided students with efficacy information about their capabilities was their vicarious experiences of observing how successfully their peers performed in similar activities. Students who experienced a low outcome, particularly at the beginning of the year, but noticed that other similar students performed successfully

believed that they too possessed the capabilities to perform well. Yet, two students who experienced recurrent low performance and took notice of other peers who were perceived as competent but failed an assignment expressed self-doubts about ever attaining high academic success. Clearly, these evaluations influenced how students enact various self-regulatory skills to attain better performance.

### *Physiological States*

Students' physiological states contributed partly to judging their writing expertise. Bandura (1986) argued that students are more inclined to expect success when they are not overwhelmed by aversive arousal than if they are tense, frustrated and agitated. As was mentioned earlier, students' self-evaluations were accompanied by negative emotional states such as frustration, anger, even shock when students received numerous criticisms, or a lower grade than expected, or no information on weaknesses or recommendations for further improvement. These states seemed to have greatly influenced some students' self-efficacy beliefs as writers, engendering a sense of inferiority and lowering their desired goals. The emotional states might have been increased by the discrepancy between students' previous perceptions of themselves as academic writers and their current academic performance. These students were high achievers in their previous degrees and they expected to attain similarly in the current studies. This situation was also worsened by students' views on the Warwick grading system. Most students often believed that C and even B were low grades; whereas in WIE they describe 'satisfactory' or 'good' work. Having undergone aversive emotional states, some students sometimes claimed 'that means I am stupid!". Furthermore, these

tensions and inner conflicts affected students' interpretations of written comments, occasionally perceiving them as inaccurate. These findings fit with Bandura's (1986) framework that identified the enactive attainments and physiological states as important sources of efficacy information that may impact on how learners judge their capabilities.

Such self-evaluation may also have a gender dimension. Tenets of attribution theory (Weiner 1972, 1974) suggested that women show a stronger tendency than men to ascribe their successes to external factors and their failures to internal features. Indeed, it was the female students who frequently experienced negative emotional states and who questioned the accuracy of their awarded grades. They often attributed their success to tutors' leniency, tutors' wish to encourage them and to the level of task difficulty. In contrast, they tended to ascribe the failures to their own capabilities. These findings are supported by the quantitative data that indicated that male students were more likely to see themselves *good writers* than female students.

However, as was mentioned earlier in this chapter, the nature of written feedback might have confused students in terms of mismatch between grades and commentary. Additionally, the research sample included one male student, which did not allow me to make any conclusive assumptions. Seen from this perspective, it is not secure to attribute the female students' self-evaluations exclusively to their gender predispositions. Central to this suggestion is Rita's case, who tended to attribute her failures and poor results to external factors such as tutors' rigid marking style, tutors' misunderstanding of her arguments and tutors' contradictory perspectives on the researched subject. These

observations suggest that other factors than gender may have contributed to students' attribution of their failures and successes.

Findings also indicated that all female students underwent erratic and temporary crises of confidence. The male student experienced a similar episode of confidence crisis at the beginning of the course. However, throughout the year he appeared to be confident about his capabilities irrespective of the nature of feedback and grades. At the end of the year, all participants showed less negative beliefs as academic writers than during the year when they read and responded to feedback. This might be explained by less strong emotional states and by a sense of accomplishment that most students experienced at the end of their course, as they managed to submit their writing assignments in time. Besides, there is a range of factors including personal, social, contextual and temporal conditions, which might have influenced the ways in which students internalised the acquired efficacy information.

### *The Construction of Identities in the Discourse Community*

The data analysis indicated that the processes of negotiation of the departmental expectations were also partly responsible for lowering students' self-efficacy beliefs and identity crises. In Ivanič's (1998) terms, students engaged in the act of writing not only to answer the task questions but also to create a discoursal self, which mitigated the tensions between the autobiographical self they brought to this setting and the possibilities for self-hood available in their discourse community (see section 2.6.7). The negotiation of the departmental expectations is said to be more than an intellectual

challenge (Ivanič 1998; Northedge 2003). Thus, it can generate deep affective and ideological conflicts with the roles and values that students bring to the course of study, which can cause erratic transformations in their sense of identity. From this perspective, students may undergo "difficult and often violent accommodations" when they "locate themselves in a discourse that is not 'naturally' or immediately theirs" (Bartholomae 1986 cited in Hyland and Hyland 2006a, p.12).

In this study, some students indicated that they felt that their identity was threatened while participating in their discourse community. From the beginning of their course, students engaged in the interactional events that conveyed implicitly and explicitly particular values, knowledge and beliefs that students were expected to adopt in their writing. However, they reported that the dominant discourses often contradicted what they wished to present. Sometimes they felt so strongly against particular beliefs and expectations that they rejected them, opting for less prestigious discourses. Hence, they felt that they had to become a different sort of writer, conveying painful and distressed personal accounts about their identity crises when accommodating to the dominant discourses. These findings are consistent with empirical study conducted by Ivanič (1998), who argued that students often felt constrained by particular values, beliefs and practices that were embodied in the discourse community and which they were expected to commit to. Thus, students' dismissal of what is valued in the community may be a result not of their poor abilities but of the mismatch between their experiences and identities they constructed in the past and the new context which they entered (Ivanič 1998; Hermerschmidt 1999, Lillis 1999).

Findings indicated a mismatch between what EAL students and tutors perceived as *originality*. Some students believed that to be original meant to introduce their own arguments or discussions without evidence or theoretical support. Some students claimed that in their previous courses they were allowed to discuss their research findings without referring to other theoretical or empirical evidence. Thus, they complained that they were not appreciated for their own ideas and views, but on the contrary they were penalised for them. At the beginning of the year, students seemed to be little aware that discourse community values when students present their views by justifying them, using arguments and evidence (Northedge 2003). Creme and Lea (2008) suggested that students need to learn to distance themselves from their personal viewpoints and set them in a wider framework of their subject. The authors concluded that writing for university can entail a contradiction between students' wish to have their say and the requirements of their subject. Towards the end, students came to understand that their *original* ideas justified by no evidence were not regarded as an original approach, but were more likely to be dismissed as "flights of personal feeling and expression" (Feedback sheet, RA3). However, such contradictions generated deep affective conflicts that debilitated students for some time.

Research participants appeared to display varying approaches to responding to dominant discourses. Oliver and Molly accommodated writing conventions without necessarily questioning them. They displayed, however, contrasting approaches to writing even if they accepted the discourse values. For instance, after experiencing some initial clashes with the dominant discourses, Oliver gradually adopted a strategic approach to writing,

focusing largely on discovering tutors' clues of an acceptable work and on reproducing taught content. In contrast, Molly sought clues to what was valued in the discourse community to use in developing new meanings through merging the privileged discourses with her personal values.

Hannah failed to learn the dominant values and conventions during the academic year. Mary and Rita seemed to resist strongly the privileged discourses and wrote in a way which accorded with their own values and beliefs. However, Mary faced her conflicting desire to preserve her identity and to adopt the new values that would guarantee academic success. She tried later to adjust her writing behaviours to the dominant discourses to secure good grades, even if she was vocally resistant to privileged discourses. She believed that the identities and values she was expected to adopt devalued her capabilities and fostered a sense of inferiority within her.

Rita encountered difficulties in accommodating to the valued discourses, preferring to follow her own writing style, beliefs and academic goals. Similarly to Mary, Rita believed that tutors regarded her knowledge as academically unworthy. These beliefs may prompt students to resign from becoming active agents of their learning. Towards the end of the course, she arranged a face-to-face meeting to discuss her failed assignment. The tutor explicitly introduced her to the writing conventions and standards highly valued in the discourse community. Initially, she resisted them perceiving that these conventions contradicted her beliefs about good work, but later she accommodated to them to secure a pass for her assignment. As a result of repeated failures, she adopted the strategic approach of seeking tutor's clues to ensure that she attained acceptable

307

outcomes when preparing and writing her dissertation. Based on Northedge's (2003) perspective on learning in a discourse community, Molly seemed to become increasingly competent both as a user of privileged discourses and as a participant in the relevant discourse community. Indeed, she revealed to engage in a debate to prove the centrality of her subject to different audiences (headteachers, government agencies) and to share the disciplinary knowledge with other academic communities (teachers). The other participants managed to become increasingly competent as users of their discourses but much less as participants in their discourse community.

These observations raised questions related to writer identity and had implications for the departmental agenda in the teaching and learning of academic writing. Clearly, all students brought their autobiographical selves to the act of writing which was not carefully considered by the discourse community and which generated crises of confidence and of identities. The current research adds to a body of empirical studies (Prior 1991; Casanave 1995; Ivanič 1998; Lea & Street 1998; Coffin *et al.* 2003) that suggested that many educational institutions assume that students already know how to write, and if not, they will learn it through completing disciplinary assignments. Further, these institutions expect that students know how to participate in what is valid within the context and cope with the intellectual and social challenges carefully selected (Northedge 2003). However, values and practices differed from module to module and from tutor to tutor. Thus, students had to find exactly what counted as an acceptable assignment structure, argumentation, critique and clarity in each context, which made learning baffling and fraught with tensions.

The literature suggests that educational institutions need to take an active position in facilitating access to the community's shared values and beliefs. Accordingly, some empirical studies (Ivanič 1998; Lea & Street 1998; Jones *et al.* 1999; Northedge 2003; Rust *et al.* 2003) argued that discourse communities are responsible for identifying their values, beliefs and practices and subjecting them to critique. Thus, tutors should clarify explicitly what they ask students to do and why. They also need to recognise and place value on the diversity of knowledge, ways of learning and writing which the novices could bring to the course of study. The scrutiny of the privileged discourses may make membership of the discourse community less exclusive, more accessible and open to contestation (Ivanič 1998). These shifts in the education curricula may be a response to the increased diversification of the student population. However, further research on how students construct their identities in their discourse community and what interventions may help them to adopt the privileged discourses without causing identity and confidence crises is needed.

Summing up, the current study identified a host of sources of efficacy information that emerged from experiences of enactive attainments, vicarious experiences of observing peer performances, verbal persuasion and social influence and physiological states. Further, findings indicated that the negotiation of the departmental expectations partly influenced the lowering of students' self-efficacy beliefs and generating identity crises. Students encountered difficulties in adopting the highly valued discourses in their writing. In cases when they ignored these discourses, they were regarded as outsiders to

the dominant literacy practices and their learning became conflictual and imbued with erratic shifts in their identities and self-efficacy beliefs.

### 11.5.2 Patterns of Change in EAL Students' Self-efficacy Beliefs

This section investigates the research question:

- *How do EAL students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers change over their course of study?*

Findings revealed that all five students thought that they improved as academic writers, developing both their lower-order skills (e.g. grammatical accuracy, referencing) and higher-order skills (critiquing, developing an argument, analysing). However, this study indicated that there was a noticeably negative change in some students' self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers throughout the year. More specifically, at the end of the year three students rated themselves lower as writers than they did at the beginning (see Table 10.1). Only one student indicated that she had higher self-efficacy beliefs than she held at the beginning of her course. Another student indicated no changes in her perceptions of herself as a writer. Nevertheless, findings indicated that some students experienced a more dramatic decline in their self-efficacy beliefs during the course than they did at the end. Thus, a couple of students reported lowering their academic goals and developing doubts about ever being able to produce good work.

Due to a small number of case studies, the results cannot be generalised to the population of all Masters students at WIE. However, there is an interesting observation that deserves further research. If the pattern of decrease in students' self-efficacy beliefs

is applied to the Masters student population at WIE, then there may be disturbing consequences. According to the quantitative results, at the beginning of the course less than half of Masters students (42.5%) regarded themselves as neither good nor bad writers. There was also over one tenth (13.7%) of Masters students who either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "*I think I am a good writer*". Considering the case studies results, it is possible that a large number of Masters students could have experienced a drop in their perceptions of themselves as writers throughout the year, which might have undermined their learning and writing efficacy.

This section addressed the research question concerning the ways in which EAL students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers changed over their course of study. The study revealed a range of factors that came into play and impacted on EAL students' self-efficacy beliefs. Thus, most students experienced highly emotional states that engendered episodes of erratic and temporary decline in self-efficacy beliefs and crises of confidence. Overall, most students experienced negative changes in their perceptions of themselves as writers throughout the course. Only one student held more positive views about her writing competence than she held at the beginning. Clearly, students' self-efficacy beliefs are central to their learning and writing experiences, informing their actions and self-regulatory mechanisms, which ultimately may impact on their academic performance.

## 11.6 EAL Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing

### 11.6.1 Changes in EAL Students' Concepts of Academic Writing

This section examines the research question:

- *How do EAL students' perceptions of academic writing change over their course of study?*

As was mentioned in previous sections, EAL students learned the writing conventions and norms specific to the discourse community through interacting with members of their discourse community, with institutional artefacts and with the training system. As a result, students constructed their own concepts of *academic writing* that evolved to varying extents throughout the year. Findings indicated that at the beginning students tended to be largely concerned with the presentational aspects of their assignments, such as grammatical accuracy, correct referencing, logical structuring and less with the analysis and critique of disciplinary knowledge. Throughout the year, as a result of interactional events most students shifted their focus to the construction of persuasive arguments and to the critique of disciplinary knowledge.

More specifically, when entering the course of study Hannah regarded herself as a blank slate with no knowledge about writing conventions valued in the chosen context. Towards the end of the year, she was able to identify some important features of good writing such as critiquing, use of a formal style and use of evidence to support arguments. However, her big concern was to express her ideas clearly and correctly, rather than constructing new meaning. The other four students extended their concepts

of academic writing, displaying an awareness of what constituted acceptable writing work, which coincided largely with tutors' perceptions (see Table 8.1). In specific terms, students highlighted that qualities such as coherence, logic, critique, organisation, grammatical accuracy, clarity of ideas and use of evidence were essential to complete a good assignment.

Interestingly, findings indicated that there was a shift in students' perceptions of the importance of their English fluency in producing good work. At the beginning of the course, most participants highlighted the centrality of English proficiency in communicating knowledge effectively. Nevertheless towards the end, two students came to emphasise it much less. They believed that in the light of the privileged discourses students did not need to be capable of sophisticated language and thinking; instead, they considered that the reproduction of disciplinary knowledge could produce satisfactory outcome. In contrast, Molly was the only student to conclude that advanced linguistic proficiency was essential to high performance. She reported that her discourse community highly valued the ability to use the linguistic skills to play with sophisticated language and to provide a gripping read.

Overall, findings indicated that all participants managed to construct and develop, to varying extents, their concepts of academic writing, moving from a focus on surface features to content-related aspects of writing. However, there is a stark difference between possessing knowledge and being able to use it in different contexts (Bandura 1986). Once students are familiar with dominant discourses, it does not follow that they will incessantly adopt them in their own writing or internalise them. Students were not

313

always successful at employing the dominant discourses. Some students preferred to resist what was valued in their chosen setting and opted for less privileged values and beliefs. In the following section, I will present the patterns of writing behaviours that were identified in students' experiences of learning to write.

### 11.6.2. Developmental Patterns in Students' Writing Experiences

Findings indicated that students displayed different writing behaviours throughout the academic year. At the beginning, all students engaged in an *assiduous discovery* of the writing conventions specific to their discourse community. More specifically, students participated in a number of literacy practices provided across the department and university. Additionally, students browsed the online resources, the institutional artefacts and books on academic writing. Importantly, throughout the year they continued to engage in an ongoing process of discovering the writing conventions through a series of interactions with members of the discourse community, with institutional artefacts and with the training system. Next, students engaged in *a trial* of both what they perceived to be appropriate for the dominant discourses and their own beliefs, values and academic goals.

Afterwards, students interacted with members of the discourse community to receive a *debriefing* on their academic performance and further actions to meet more closely the academic standards. Further, in the light of efficacy information about their competence and of tutors' recommendations, students engaged in a phase of *change* in their perceptions of academic writing, their values and of their writing behaviours. However,

314

these changes did not always produce desired outcomes. Finally, students engaged in a

*new trial* of preparation for, discovery of the writing conventions and of completion of

writing tasks. Overall, these behavioural patterns were identified in most participants'

writing processes. The only exception was Hannah, who did not use feedback for feed

forward purposes. During the academic year, she underwent few changes in her writing

development. Yet, Hannah reported important transformations in her writing knowledge

and skills at the very end of her half-year extension.

There is another important point to make about students' writing development that was

observed among the case studies. Throughout the course, most students' accounts

suggested that they moved to a growing dependence on tutors' guidance and feedback.

They shifted their attention from discovering assiduously the dominant discourses to

seeking clues in securing acceptable grades, wanting ever increasingly precise

definitions and explanations of the criteria. Accordingly, from the middle of the

academic year such statements as "*you want to do a work according to what the tutors*

*want*" or "*the tutorial directed me to where she [tutor] wants me to write on and which*

*areas she wants to develop more*" or "*Without his [tutor's] comments, I couldn't do*

*anything*" became increasingly common among research participants.

This is an interesting observation considering that Masters students are expected to

engage in increasingly independent work, to be able to use specialist discourses and to

participate actively in the given discourse community. However, these students tended to

display a growing reliance on tutors and on approaches of reformulating taught content

in their writing. In Brown *et al.*'s terms (1989, p.39), tutors managed, to varying extents,

to "model" desired writing knowledge and behaviours and to "coach" students to perform new tasks. However, they did not succeed in empowering students to work independently and in "fading" from their writing processes.

The shift in students' approaches might have been caused by feedback practices as they continuously suggested that they had failed to meet the departmental standards and required them to act upon it. This is consistent with Lea's (1998) study that suggested that assessment practices encouraged students to employ reformulation approach to constructing academic knowledge. Besides, the shift might have been determined by students' misinterpretations of grading system and the amount of implicit knowledge that often impeded them to participate actively in their discourse community. Consequently, students became more performance goal-oriented and sought increasingly precise definitions, detailed feedback and explanations for each criterion for completing acceptable work. The literature suggests that there is a fine balance to be struck between providing students with constructive guidance and feedback and encouraging them to adopt a strategic approach to writing (Norton 2004). Norton argues that assessment practices may engender in students an over-dependence on tutor guidance and a focus on strategic approaches to completing writing assignments. These observations coupled with the findings that a large number of literacy practices do not guarantee academic success should call for a thorough examination of feedback practices and dominant discourses to establish interventions to help Masters students to become independent and successful learners.

This section explored how EAL students' perceptions of academic writing changed over their course of study. Students underwent a number of changes in their perceptions of academic writing as a result of their participation in the community's interactional events and apprenticeship. However, it did not follow that these students always translated the accumulated knowledge into their writing successfully. Paradoxically, students' writing development was accompanied by an increasing dependence on tutors' guidance and preferences for reformulation approach of taught content. These observations suggest that the Masters course needs to be 'constructively aligned' (Biggs 1999, p.11). From this perspective, each component of the curriculum – learning outcomes, the learning and teaching methods and the assessment methods – should follow one from another and be interconnected. It follows that the feedback practices need to reflect the learning outcomes of the Masters course.

## 11.7 Conclusions

This chapter identified the main themes and factors that came into play to influence EAL students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers. It emphasised both the potential and the drawbacks of the interactional events students engaged with as part of their course of studies. Clearly, the literacy practices either enhanced or compromised students' understanding of writing conventions, often constraining their participation to the periphery of the community. The major line of argument that runs through this study is that learning to write in a new discourse community can be a complex, dynamic and interactional process, accompanied by positive and/or negative changes in students' perceptions of academic writing and of

themselves as academic writers. Having taken a Masters course does not guarantee that students will become independent and successful writers. On the contrary, this research revealed that students became increasingly dependent on tutors' guidance and preferred to reproduce the disciplinary knowledge rather than engaging in meaning-making processes. The chapter suggested numerous strategies and interventions that may help to overcome some of the difficulties in providing support for student writing.

In the next chapter, I will summarise the conclusions of the current work and outline the contributions to theory and practice. It will also discuss the limitations of the present study and the recommendations for future research.

# Chapter 12 – Conclusion

## 12.1 Introduction

This research sought to explore how five EAL students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers changed during the year. The current chapter provides a summary of the key research findings from questionnaires, interviews and feedback sheets. This chapter also considers the implications of the study for policy and practice. Finally, it acknowledges the limitations of this project and suggests several recommendations for future research.

## 12.2 Overview of Key Research Findings

### 12.2.1 Findings from Questionnaire

Chapters 5 – 10 presented in detail the research findings. In relation to the quantitative data, the study showed that students enrolled for Master Taught courses at WIE came from a wide variety of educational backgrounds. Essentially, the respondents brought different writing experiences, values and self-efficacy beliefs as writers to their course of study. Although the majority of students indicated that they wrote academically quite often, it appeared that they tended to have received limited preparation for writing academically within their previous degrees. In particular, this work revealed that a large

number of students claimed never to have experienced tutor and/or peer feedback.

Furthermore, many students claimed never to have completed statistical presentations,

critique, thesis, reports and literature review, which represented key types of writing in

their discourse community. In addition, NES and EAL students held varying views

about what good writing work entailed. For instance, NES students rated *relevance of*

*ideas to be included* as the second rank, whereas EAL students placed it on the fifth

rank. EAL students also prioritised *logical organisation of arguments* and *originality of*

*ideas*. This influenced the course of their writing behaviours. Thus, feedback sheets

indicated that most EAL students occasionally failed to include the relevant

bibliographies in their assignments. Additionally, some students had contradictory

interpretations of the term *originality* compared to tutors', engendering tensions and

misunderstandings with them.

Findings indicated that many respondents either displayed positive or neutral

perceptions of themselves as writers. However, NES students were more likely to hold

positive self-efficacy beliefs than EAL students. Students who regarded themselves as

good writers were more likely to enjoy writing and to write often for pleasure. They also

claimed to have received positive feedback on their writing capabilities from tutors and

peers. Furthermore, these students showed strong self-efficacy beliefs on being able to

organise arguments logically, being good at mechanics, expressing ideas clearly and

being aware of assessment criteria and of marker expectations.

### *12.2.2 Findings from Interviews*

In relation to the research question – *How do EAL students come to understand the academic writing conventions and requirements expected by their course?* – the current research indicated that learning to write in HE was an active, interactional and dynamic process encompassing three major interactional events (cf. Casanave 1995): *interactions with members of the discourse community* (tutors, peers and teacher-assistants), *with the training system* (taught module sessions, writing assignments, academic writing class, CELTE support) and *with institutional artefacts (*samples of previously written work, guidelines and assessment criteria). These literacy practices were designed to introduce students to the disciplinary knowledge and writing conventions valued in their discourse community.

### *Interactions with Members of the Discourse Community*

Findings revealed that all participants emphasised the importance of learning opportunities with the more experienced members of the discourse community (i.e. tutors and teacher-assistants), asserting that they enabled them to access privileged writing conventions. Nevertheless, findings indicated that these interactional events also compromised students' participation and learning. Several sources of difficulty were identified: untimely feedback, type of language used to provide commentary, students' individual differences and self-regulatory skills, variation in tutors' preferences for assessment criteria and the nature of feedback. These difficulties sometimes contributed to poor academic results as well as influenced several students' self-efficacy beliefs as writers, fostering self-doubts about achieving good outcomes. Importantly, the current

study indicated that the transfer of writing knowledge and skills from one context to another was often undermined by variations in tutors' beliefs about what counted as good writing. Thus, students had to find out exactly what counted as an acceptable assignment structure, argument, critique and clarity in each context, which made learning baffling and fraught with conflict. These findings suggested that, despite a number of literacy practices designed to make expectations transparent, there was a level of invisibility of tutors' expectations, values, conventions and identities students were expected to adopt in their writing.

### *Interactions with Peers*

Findings indicated that participants underwent positive changes in their views on the effectiveness of peer feedback during the course. If initially all participants were negative about the capacity of peers to offer effective feedback, once they engaged in writing they started informally to seek each others' support. Accordingly, towards the end of the course students engaged more actively with peers and displayed more positive views about their help. The most striking changes occurred to Molly's perceptions, who believed that her peer interactions enriched her learning considerably. Data analysis indicated that course design made a difference to students' perceptions of peer feedback. Thus, the Masters course in Drama and Theatre Education assigned collaborative and group work that appeared to contribute to the development of a supportive and encouraging ethos among peers. Molly acknowledged that these activities helped her to gain trust and to regard her peers as intangible assets to her learning experience.

However, research asserted that there is a need for careful planning and support when embarking on this type of interaction.

### *Interactions with Institutional Artefacts*

Other important interactional events that came into play and influenced how EAL students made sense of the academic conventions was interactions *with institutional artefacts (*samples of previously written assignments, published guidelines and assessment criteria). Findings suggested that detailed guidelines and previous years' samples facilitated students' understanding of task requirements and writing conventions. However, some students occasionally ignored guidelines that required them to relate their assignments to materials learned on the course and to reading lists. Students preferred to use materials published in their own countries or to select their own resources that often compromised their outcomes. Participants failed to recognise that tutors' judgement about the quality of written texts is informed by their use of disciplinary knowledge. Instead, some students believed that the requirement for using particular theories was tutors' personal quirk. This observation therefore suggests that assessment criteria need to make more explicit on whether disciplinary knowledge or knowledge-making practices are valued.

The research also revealed that most students disregarded the assessment criteria, which were strongly advocated by tutors for their central role in the enhancement of both teaching and learning. Even though assessment criteria and grade descriptors were explicit, they failed to transfer knowledge on assessment standards to students who appeared to be unable to understand them. This study identified several problems with

the ways in which the departmental assessment criteria were articulated to students.

Firstly, the assessment criteria did not indicate weighting of one criterion in relation to other criteria (Shay 2008). Secondly, different tutors appeared to have varying priorities when marking an assignment. Next, the assessment criteria did not include benchmarks or exemplification materials for securing what different criteria might mean. Hence, there was a discrepancy between how students and tutors interpreted particular success criteria and how they applied them to the writing assignments.

### *Interactions with the Training System*

Another important interactional event that came into play and influenced how EAL students made sense of the academic conventions and disciplinary knowledge was interactions with the *training system* (taught module sessions, writing assignments, academic writing class, CELTE support and other literacy practices). Thus, modules that incorporated seminars, oral presentations, guest talks, group discussions, practical activities and reading materials constituted important opportunities for students to engage with the disciplinary knowledge and to move gradually to a growing participation in their discourse community. In contrast, modules that provided fewer opportunities to engage in discussion and construction of the disciplinary knowledge, but offered mainly practical activities (e.g. role play, games) were criticised by students. On these occasions, students reported facing difficulties in engaging with the disciplinary knowledge while writing. Essentially, the provision of writing assignments, academic writing class, CELTE support and other literacy practices enabled students to extend their disciplinary knowledge and to acquire writing conventions.

To sum up, this study indicated that literacy practices either enhanced or compromised students' understanding of writing conventions and norms, which in turn influenced their participation in their community. Despite the provision of literacy practices designed to make the expectations visible to students, there was a level of invisibility of tutors' expectations and values students were expected to adopt. This study proposed a range of strategies and interventions that may help to overcome some of the difficulties in providing support for student writing, which will be summarised in the subsequent sections.

### *Changes in EAL Students' Perceptions of Themselves as Academic Writers*

Regarding the question: *What are the factors that come into play during the course which impact on the students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers?* – the current study identified a host of sources of efficacy information that emerged from such factors as enactive attainments, vicarious experiences of observing the performances of peers, verbal persuasion and social influence and students' physiological states. Further, the processes of negotiating departmental expectations also partly influenced the lowering of students' self-efficacy beliefs and contributed to their identity crises. Students often perceived the highly-valued discourses as contravening their beliefs about good writing work, believing that they were too prescriptive and constraining personal values. However, they tried to accommodate them to secure acceptable outcomes. Consequently, most students, in particular female students, underwent writing experiences fraught with conflictual and erratic shifts in their identities and their self-efficacy beliefs.

This research adds to a body of empirical studies, suggesting that many tutors assumed students already knew how to write, and if they did not, they would learn it through completing disciplinary assignments. Moreover, students were expected to know how to participate in what was highly-valued and to face the intellectual and social challenges specific to this educational institution. Nevertheless, students often struggled to learn the expectations and values of what was involved in writing, mainly because of the implicit knowledge that they had to make sense of and the varying practices with which they had to engage.

Regarding the question: *How do EAL students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers change over their course of study?* – the main finding is that there was a noticeably negative trend in many students' self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers throughout the year. These changes occurred as a result of the mismatch between students' previous self-efficacy beliefs as writers and their perceptions of how tutors currently viewed their writing capabilities. Furthermore, some students experienced more dramatic episodes of temporary decrease in self-efficacy beliefs and crises of confidence during the year than they reported at the end of the course. Students brought their autobiographical selves to writing which they felt were ignored by the discourse community, leading to crises of confidence and of identities and to a lowering of academic goals and expectations. Clearly, students' self-efficacy beliefs were central to their learning and writing experiences, informing their actions and self-regulatory mechanisms that partly impacted on their academic performance. These observations raised questions related to writer identity and the implications that these findings carry for the departmental agenda in the teaching and learning of academic writing.

### *Changes in EAL Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing*

Regarding the question: *How do EAL students' perceptions of academic writing change over their course of study?* – findings indicated that students underwent a number of changes in their perceptions of academic writing as a result of interactions with members of the discourse community, with institutional artefacts and with the training system. Students constructed their own concepts of academic writing through peripheral participation in the community's literacy events and apprenticeship. Findings indicated that at the beginning of the year students tended to be largely concerned with presentational aspects of their assignments, such as grammatical accuracy, correct referencing, logical structuring and less with the analysis and critique of disciplinary knowledge. Throughout the course, most students shifted their focus to the construction of persuasive arguments and critique of disciplinary knowledge. This suggested that they expanded their knowledge about what their discourse community valued and moved their construct of academic writing into line with features common to tutors' expectations. However, it did not follow that these students always translated the accumulated knowledge into their writing processes successfully.

Paradoxically, students' writing development was accompanied by negative trends in their approaches to learning and writing. Thus, most students adopted strategic approaches to seeking tutor's clues to ensure that they attained acceptable outcomes when writing their last pieces of writing. This study suggested that feedback practices and the discrepancy between students' and departmental expectations and values might have engendered an over-dependence on tutor guidance and focus on strategic

327

approaches to writing. Consequently, participants became increasingly dependent on tutors' feedback and wanted more precise definitions and explanations of each criterion. Having taken a Masters course did not guarantee that students became independent and successful learners.

The major line of argument that runs through this study is that learning to write in a new discourse community may be a complex, dynamic and interactional process influenced by many social, contextual and individual factors. Essentially, learning to write is accompanied by positive and/or negative changes in students' perceptions of academic writing, of themselves as academic writers and of their identities.

Summing up, this study captured what it was like to be a Masters student taking a course in Education, catching the close-up reality of completing writing assignments and presenting in-depth descriptions of participants' lived experiences, of their beliefs about their given tasks. Consequently, this project suggested that EAL students struggled with bigger issues such as familiarity with writing conventions, discipline knowledge and values specific to their discourse community rather than with grammatical accuracy, structuring and referencing.

## 12.3 The Research Contributions

This study has contributed to the field of EAL students' writing in UK HE. The contributions are theoretical and methodological, which I will describe in the next sections.

### *12.3.1 Theoretical Contribution*

This research contributed to the understanding of EAL students' writing, drawing on a number of social, contextual and individual factors. The work took account of such concepts as identity, assessment practices and power difference, succeeding in giving a voice to EAL students who disclosed, even if only partially, their writing experiences and perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers. It problematised the institutional approach to introducing EAL students to the writing conventions and values that were highly-valued in the given context. It also highlighted the centrality of discourse community to the sustainability of student learning. As such, students who were provided with opportunities where they could feel experts developed a sense of belonging to their discourse community, whereas students who had fewer participative opportunities felt like outsiders of the community. The research also revealed a gap between institutional and student expectations and values, which generated confusion and frustration for both sides. Careful planning of literacy practices and participative activities proved to be crucial to sustain students' writing development.

### *12.3.2 Methodological Contribution*

The current study added some methodological value to the work of ACLITS researchers. The research adopted the ACLITS approach as a conceptual and analytical framework, which provided valuable tools to examine and describe the phenomenon under consideration. It placed student writing in a specific context characterised by particular disciplinary interactions and practices rather than regarding it as a decontextualised event that concerned individual students. This perspective is supported by changes in L2

writing research where attention has shifted from writing as product or act of inscription to a broader view of writing context, including factors related to learners, institution and social settings. As was mentioned earlier, this approach underpinned sweeping changes in the research design and data collection instruments to fit the emerging alterations in the conceptualisation of the theoretical framework. For instance, interview questions examining student revision and drafting processes were no longer appropriate. Instead, I questioned students about topics they identified as key to their writing experiences. Additionally, I stopped using the stimulated recall method to analyse students' revision changes they had produced as a result of feedback. Thus, this approach enabled me to be open to what students had to say rather than fitting it into pre-existing assumptions and theories.

This study also designed an analytical framework for examining the complexity of interactions that students engaged with as part of their course of study: *interactions with members of the discourse community*, *with the training system* and *with institutional artefacts*. This framework can be further developed and tested in future studies to explore student writing.

## 12.4 Implications for Practice

This project outlined a number of problems surrounding student writing and indicated some potential interventions to enhance the effects of literacy practices on student writing. These implications of the findings will be discussed next for each of the following areas:

a) Discourse community

b) Designers of curriculum

c) Tutors

d) Students

e) Community of researchers

## Discourse Community

- The discourse community needs to critically rethink its position on academic writing and embed it as a key component in Masters courses, rather than viewing it as a set of generic skills that should be fixed by language/writing support tutors.

- The discourse community has the responsibility to identify its values, beliefs and practices and to communicate them explicitly to students. The community needs to be clear about what they ask students to do and why.

- The discourse community has to subject its values, beliefs and practices to critique, so that it values the diversity of knowledge and the ways of learning and writing which the novices bring to the course of study. The scrutiny of the privileged discourses may make the membership of the discourse community less exclusive and more accessible.

- The discourse community needs to offer students enough participative and dialogic learning opportunities to access legitimately disciplinary values, knowledge and conventions.

- There is a necessity to reconsider the assessment practices that engendered in most participants an over-dependence on tutors' guidance and a focus on strategic approaches to completing writing assignments.

- There is a need for a greater consistency in tutors' preferences for writing conventions and criteria of success.

## Designers of Curriculum

- There is a necessity to constructively align each component of the curriculum – the learning outcomes, learning and teaching methods and assessment methods. Accordingly, these components should follow on from another and be interconnected. From this perspective, feedback practices need to reflect the learning outcomes of the Masters course.

- There is a need for participative and collaborative practices to engage students in meaning-making processes. Such practices as oral presentations, workshops, performances, conferences and tutorials appeared to be highly-valued by students. In particular, collaborative work that entailed students working together on devising and teaching schemes created a supportive and encouraging ethos among some students.

- It has been suggested that peer feedback can be an important tool of gaining access to disciplinary knowledge. Some students might be better equipped or positioned to make sense of the implicit and explicit academic knowledge than others. Additionally, Masters students can constitute a culturally, socially and

educationally diverse pool of resources that, if harnessed adequately, could engender enriching learning experiences among different categories of students (i.e. novice and more experienced members, EAL and NES students).

- There is a necessity to revise the ways in which assessment criteria are communicated to students. A body of empirical studies suggests a number of participative interventions such as marking exercises, exemplification materials and peer marking for heightening students' understanding and use of assessment criteria.

- There is a need for providing sufficient learning opportunities for students' writing development. Four or five assignments did not help most students to build up a sense of confidence and progression in their writing skills. Consequently, they did not gain full access to the disciplinary knowledge and did not manage to move from a peripheral to a fuller participation in their discourse community.

**Tutors**

- Tutors need to communicate to students the purposes and expectations of the literacy practices (e.g. tutorials, peer interaction, electronic feedback) before students engage with them. Students need to understand how these interactions work and how they can help them.

- Tutors need to be more explicit about the rationale for using particular institutional artefacts such as samples, assessment criteria and guidelines to inform student writing.

- Tutors need to engage in a dialogue with students about approaches to making sense of and to responding to different types of feedback. Students also need help with selecting appropriate strategies for feeding forward in their writing processes.

- Interconnected writing tasks can be regarded as an important way of introducing students to strategies surrounding the use and response to written feedback. This research indicated that most participants used tutors' commentary on assignment one to inform the subsequent assignment. But it does not guarantee that all students will apply the same techniques to the following assignments.

- There is a need for well-timed feedback to support students at revising and drafting stages.

- It has been suggested that EAL students favoured language that stated directly the intent of tutors' comments on where a revision was needed.

- Tutors need to provide, whenever is possible, detailed and specific commentary with reference to students' weaknesses and strengths. Importantly, they need to show why certain changes were needed and how to improve those areas. Further, students sought positive reinforcements of the aspects they excelled at, which they could apply in subsequent writing.

- Tutors need to be careful how they articulate their feedback and what messages they convey, as the discrepancy between comments and the grade descriptors may constitute a source of puzzlement for students.

- Tutors need to monitor group discussions/tutorials/collaborative work as they can be pitched too low, so that students continue to use an everyday discourse and make no progress towards the values and language of the more experienced members of the discourse community. Alternatively, these interactions can be pitched too high, so that few students can genuinely participate.

- Tutors need to be more explicit about the centrality of knowledge-making practices and of incorporating the dominant disciplinary knowledge into student writing.

**Students**

- Students need to learn how to participate in what is valid and expected within a particular context. Normally, they are expected to engage actively with literacy practices to develop specific ways of talking, writing and thinking about the field.

- Students need to align themselves to the disciplinary knowledge and to the required new identities if they want to move from peripheral to more central participation in their discourse community.

- Students need to be more careful when considering tutors' expectations and guidelines. They often failed to realise that tutors' recommendations were a means to introduce them to the dominant writing conventions rather than their personal quirks.

- Students need to employ effective strategies to benefit from the literacy practices. For instance, it may be helpful if they submit a detailed outline or elaborate a list

of questions about their assignments ahead of tutor-student individualised

interactions.

**Community of Researchers**

- The current research invites researchers to further explore how academic

  community can build up a community of practice, so that students become its

  fully-fledged members.

- This study calls for further research on establishing effective intervention

  programmes or mechanisms to empower students to write in their disciplinary

  context. Essentially, this tuition should enable Masters students to become

  independent and successful learners. It is also crucial that these mechanisms are

  feasible in the current situation when there is a constant diversification of student

  population and a steady decrease in human and financial resources.

- This research project raised questions about student identity, which invite

  additional research on how students construct their identities and what

  interventions may help them to adopt the privileged discourses without causing

  identity and confidence crises.

## 12.5 Limitations of the Research

There are several limitations that need to be examined. Although this study aimed to

explore EAL students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic

writers, an inclusion of other participants (CELTE tutors, co-ordinating tutor for

international students, tutor- assistants) in the research sample might have enriched the

perspectives on the phenomenon under study. Importantly, it would have been helpful to interview tutors from Drama and Theatre Education course.

It is important to mention that the number of case studies was very small and bound to one institution. The sample was also very much gender-oriented as most of the interviewees were women. Furthermore, the research sample embodied an inequality in student ethnicity. Thus, the sample included three East Asian students. For these reasons, the results cannot be generalised to other populations of Masters EAL students across UK HE.

The use of the mixed methods framework had clear benefits, which were disclosed in chapter 3. Although literature suggests that this research has a short but prolific tradition, it is difficult to set quality criteria for assessing this sort of research methodology (Teddlie & Tashakkori 2009). Yet I tried to follow a number of potential measures recommended by Creswell (2003, 2007) and Bassey (1999) to enhance the validity and reliability of this study. Also, I tried to integrate the findings that had emerged from different data collection instruments, providing more comprehensive explanations for these results. I compared and contrasted the views on the researched subject among students and tutors. Nevertheless, this study would have benefitted from tutors' views on the feedback sheets provided to the participants, as this project focused only on students' perceptions of feedback and on tutors' written feedback sheets.

## 12.6 Recommendations for Future Research

There are several recommendations that could strengthen the relevance and the validity of the research findings. One potential recommendation is the use of an ethnographic approach in which such approaches as using extensive textual data (e.g. students' writing assignments and notes, tutors' electronic feedback) and classroom observation that examines the discourse that takes place in tutorials and oral presentations can add more authority to the findings. Secondly, the sample could be enlarged to encompass more participants (e.g. teacher-assistants, co-ordinating tutors, language support tutors and curriculum designers). A key gain could be a comparative exploration of how NES and EAL students learn to write in the given context. The myriad of instruments and participants could comprehensively illuminate the complexity of student writing in HE.

Another recommendation is to replicate this study across different institutions and/or across other disciplines. It would be interesting to find out how Masters students learn to write in Sciences, Arts or Humanities across the University of Warwick. Do EAL students taking a Masters degree in History encounter similar writing issues? Does the Chemistry department provide the same literacy practices to support student writing as in the Education department? etc. Obviously, such a study could contribute substantially to the field of academic writing, as it can produce more reliable and informative findings. Nevertheless, studies with such a scope would pose a multitude of challenges to researchers and would require an enormous amount of resources that one researcher would not be able to cope with. Another fundamental gain to this study could be the

contribution of researchers from different fields (e.g. applied linguistics and

psychology). Without doubt, this approach would instil more authority to the findings.

In conclusion, this study has helped to understand the changes in EAL students' beliefs

about academic writing and their self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers. These

findings can be considered useful in providing support for EAL students at HE level.

# Bibliography

Abell, J., *et al*. (2006). Trying similarity, doing difference: the role of interviewer self-disclosure in interview talk with young people. *Qualitative Research*, **6**(2), pp.221-244.

Adam, C. and Artemeva, N. (2002). Writing instruction in English for academic purposes (eap) classes: introducing second language learners to the academic community. In: Johns, A.M., ed. *Genre in the classroom: Multiple perspectives.* Mahwah; London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.179-196.

Andrews, R. (2007). Argumentation, critical thinking and the postgraduate dissertation. *Educational Review*, **59**(1), pp.1-18.

Baker, C. (1997). Membership categorization and interview accounts. In: Silverman, D., ed. *Qualitative research: Theory, Method and Practice*. London: SAGE Publications, pp.130-143.

Baker, C. (2004). Membership categorization and interview accounts. In: Silverman, D., ed. *Qualitative research*. London: SAGE Publications, pp.162-176.

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: a social cognitive theory*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy*. New York: W.H.Freeman and Company.

Barry, C.A. (1998). Choosing qualitative data analysis software: Atlas/ti and Nudist compared. *Sociological Research Online.* [Online]. (URL http://www.socresonline.org.uk/3/3/4.html). **3**(3). (Accessed 14 July 2007).

Barton, D. and Hamilton, M. (2000). Litracy practices. In: Barton, D., Hamilton, M. and Ivanič, R., eds. *Situated literacies: reading and writing in context*. London & New York: Routledge, pp.7-19.

Bassey, M. (1999). *Case study research in educational settings*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Baynham, M. (2000). Academic writing in new and emergent discipline area. In: Lea M.R. and Stierer, B., eds. *Student writing in higher education*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press, pp.17-32.

Bazeley, P. (2007). *Qualitative data analysis with NVivo*. London: SAGE Publications.

Bazeley, P. and Richards, L. (2000). *The NVivo qualitative project book.* London: SAGE.

Beaufort, A. (2000). Learning the trade: a social apprenticeship model for gaining writing expertise. *Written Communication*, **17**(3), pp.185-223.

Belcher, D. (1994). The apprenticeship approach to advanced academic literacy: graduate students and their mentors. *English for Specific Purposes*, **13**(1), pp. 23-34.

Belcher, D. and Braine, G. eds. (1995). *Academic writing in a second language: essays on research and pedagogy*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

341

Benson, P.J. and Heidish P. (1995). The ESL technical expert: writing processes and classroom practices. In: Belcher, D. and Braine, G., eds. *Academic writing in a second language: essays on research and pedagogy*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, pp.313- 330.

BERA Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004). [Online] (URL http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/guidelines/ethica1.pdf). (Accessed 19 June 2007).

Bereiter, C. and Scardamalia, M. (1987). *The psychology of written composition.* Hillsdale; London: Erlbaum.

Berg, B.L. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. New York: Hafner Publishing Company.

Berg, E.C. (1999). The effects of trained peer response ESL students' revision types and writing quality. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **8**(3), pp.215-241.

Bergman, M.M. (2008). *Advances in mixed methods research*. London: SAGE.

Bergstorm, C. (2004). The Status of Writing in the University. *English Subject Centre*, Newsletter, **6** (Feb.), pp.10-13. [Online] (URL http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/newsletters/newsissue6/bergstrom.htm). (Accessed on 15 October 2008).

Biggs, J. (1987). *The process of learning.* Sydney; London: Prentice Hall of Australia: Prentice-Hall International Inc.

Biggs, J. (1999). *Teaching for quality learning at university.* Buckingham: SRHE & Open University Press.

Biggs, J. (2003). *Teaching for quality learning at university: what the student does*. Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Biggs, J., Kember, D. and Leung, D. (2001). The revised two-factor study process questionnaire: R-SPQ-2F. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, **71**(2), pp.133-148.

Bizzell, P. (1982). Review: College Composition: Initiation into the Academic Discourse Community. *Curriculum Inquiry*, **12**(2), pp. 191-207.

Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education,* **5**(1), pp.7–74.

Blackmore, C. and Ison, R. (1998). Boundaries for thinking and action. In: Thomas, A., Chataway, J. and Wuyts, M., eds. *Finding out fast: investigative skills for policy and development.* London: SAGE in association with the Open University, pp.41-66.

Blaikie, N. (2000). *Designing social research: the logic of anticipation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bloxham, S. and West, A. (2007). Learning to write in higher education: students' perceptions of an intervention in developing understanding of assessment criteria. *Teaching in Higher Education*, **12**(1), pp.77-89.

Brannen, J. (2008). The practice of a mixed methods research strategy: personal, professional and project considerations. In: Bergman, M.M., ed. *Advances in mixed methods research.* London: SAGE, pp.53-65.

Brice, C. (1995). ESL writers' reactions to teacher commentary: A case study. *ERIC Document*. Reproduction Service N. ED394312.

Briggs, C.L. (1986). *Learning how to ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research*. [Online] (URL http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/samples/cam034/85029153.pdf). (Accessed 19 September 2009).

Brinko, K.T. (1993). The practice of giving feedback to improve teaching: what is effective? *Journal of Higher Education*, **64**(5), pp.574-593.

Brooks, V. (2002). *Assessment in secondary schools: the new teacher's guide to monitoring, assessment, recording, reporting and accountability.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Brown, J., Collins, A. and Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher,* **18**(1), pp.32–42.

Bruffee, A. (1984). Collaborative learning and the "conversation of mankind". *College English*, **46**(7), pp.635-652.

Bryman, A. (2008). Why do researchers integrate/combine/mesh/blend/mix/merge/fuse quantitative and qualitative research? In*:* Bergman, M.M., ed. *Advances in mixed methods research.* London: SAGE, pp.87-100.

Canagarajah, A.S. (2002). *Critical academic writing and multilingual students*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Carroll, J. and Ryan, J., eds. (2005). *Teaching international students*. London; New York: Routledge.

Carson, J.G. and Nelson, G.L. (1994). Writing groups: cross-cultural issues. *Journal of Second Language Writing,* **3**(1), pp.17-30.

Casanave, C.P. (1995). Local interactions: constructing contexts for composing in a graduate sociology program. In: Belcher, D. and Braine, G., eds. *Academic writing in a second language: essays on research and pedagogy*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, pp.85-110.

Catt, R. and Gregory, G. (2006). The point of writing: is student writing in higher education developed or merely assessed? In: Ganobcsik-Williams, L., ed. *Teaching Academic Writing in UK higher education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillian, pp.16-29.

Chapin, R. and Terdal, M. (1990). Responding to our response: student strategies for responding to teacher written comments. *ERIC Document.* Reproduction Service No. ED328098.

Clarke, C. (2003). *The future of higher education.* [Online]. *(URL http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/hegateway/uploads/White%20Pape.pdf). (Accessed 15 November 2009).

Coffin, C., *et al., eds.* (2003). *Teaching academic writing: a toolkit for higher education.* London & New York: Routledge.

Cohen, L. and Manion, L. (1989). *Research methods in education*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2000). *Research methods in education*. 5th ed. London: Routledge & Falmer.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education*. 6th ed. New York: Routledge.

Connor, U. and Asenavage, K. (1994). Peer response groups in ESL writing classes: How Much Impact on Revision? *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **3**(3), pp.257-276.

Connor, U.M. and Kramer, M.G. (1995). Writing from sources: case studies of graduate students in business management. In: Belcher, D. and Braine, G., eds. *Academic writing in a second language: essays on research and pedagogy*. New Jersey: Ablex publishing Corporation, pp.155-182.

Conrad, S.M. and Goldstein, L.M. (1999). ESL student revision after teacher-written comments: Text, context, and individuals. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **8**(2), pp.147–180.

Creme, P. and Lea, M.R. (2008). *Writing at university*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Creswell, J.W. (2003). *Research design*. California; Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. California; Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research*. London: SAGE Publications.

Dey, I. (1993). *Qualitative data analysis*. London & New York: Routledge.

Drever, E. (1995). *Using semi-structured interviews in small-scale research.* Glasgow: The Scottish Council for Research in Education.

Ellery, K. (2008). Assessment for learning: a case study using feedback effectively in an essay-style test. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, **33**(4), pp.421-429.

Ellis, R. (2009). A typology of written corrective feedback types. *ELT Journal,* **63**(2), pp.97-107.

Ellis, R.A. and Calvo, R.A. (2004). Learning through discussions in blended environments. *Educational Media International*, **41**(3), pp.263-274.

Ellis, R.A., *et al.* (2004). Learning through discussions. *Higher Education Research and Development,* **23**(1), pp.73-93.

Ellis, R.A., Marcus, G. and Taylor, R. (2005). Learning through inquiry: student difficulties with online course-based Material. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning,* **21**(4), pp.239–252.

Enginarlar, H. (1993). Student response to teacher feedback in EFL writing. *System*, **21**(2), pp.193–204.

Englert, C.S., Mariage, T.V. and Dunsmore, K. (2008). Tenets of sociocultural theory in writing instruction research. *In:* MacArthur, C.A., Graham, S. and Fitzgerald, J., eds. *Handbook of writing research*. New York: Guilford Press, pp.208-221.

English, F. (1999). Towards a descriptive framework for analysing student writing. In: Jones, C., *et al*., eds. *Students writing in the university: cultural and epistemological issues*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp.17-36.

Ferris, D.R. (1995). Student reactions to teacher response in multiple-draft composition classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly*, **29**(1), pp.33–53.

Ferris, D.R. (1997). The influence of teacher commentary on student revision. *TESOL Quarterly*, **31**(2), pp.315-339.

Ferris, D.R. (2003). *Response to student writing: implications for second language students*. Mahwah; London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Flower, L.S. and Hayes, J.R. (1980). The dynamics of composing: making plans and juggling constraints. In: Gregg, L.W. and Steinberg, E.R., eds. *Cognitive processes in writing*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., pp.31-50.

Francis, B., Robson, J. and Read, B. (2001). An analysis of undergraduate writing styles in the  Context of Gender and Achievement. *Studies in Higher Education*, **26**(3), pp.313-326.

Ganobcsick-Williams, L. (2004). *A report on the teaching of academic writing in UK Higher Education.* The Royal Literary Fund.

Ganobcsik-Williams, L. ed. (2006). *Teaching academic writing in UK higher education.* New York: Palgrave Macmillian.

Gardner, G. (2001). Unreliable memories and other contingencies: problems with biographical knowledge. *Qualitative Research,* **1**(2), pp.185-204.

Gass, S. and Mackey, A. (2000). *Stimulated recall methodology in second language research*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Gee, P. (1998). What is Literacy? In: Zamel, V. and Spack, R., eds. *Negotiating academic literacies: teaching and learning across languages and cultures.* London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.51-61.

Gerring, J. (2007). *Case study research*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gibbs, G. (1992). *Improving the quality of student learning.* Bristol: Technical & Educational Services.

Gibbs, G.R. (2002). *Qualitative data analysis: explorations with NVivo.* London: Open University Press.

Gilliam, B. (2000). *The research interview*. London: Continuum.

Goldstein, L. (2001). Responding to ESL writers. In: Silva, T. & Matsuda, P.K., eds. *On second language writing*. New Jersey: Laurence Erlbaum Associates Inc., pp.73-90.

Goldstein, L. (2004). Questions and answers about teacher written commentary and student revision: teachers and students working together. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **13**(1), pp.63–80.

Goldstein, L. (2006). Feedback and revision in second language writing: contextual, teacher, and student variables. In: Hyland, K. and Hyland, F., eds. *Feedback in second language writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp.185-205.

Goldstein, L.M. and Conrad, S.M. (1990). Student Input and Negotiation of Meaning in ESL Writing Conferences. *TESOL Quarterly*, **24**(3), pp.443-460.

Gourlay, L. (2009). Threshold practices: becoming a student through academic literacies. London Review of Education, **7**(2), pp.181-192.

Grabe, W. (2001). Notes toward a theory of second language writing. In: Silva, T. and Matsuda, P.K. eds. *On second language writing*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum associates, pp.39-58.

Grabe, W. and Kaplan, R.B. (1996). *Theory and practice of writing*. London: Pearson Education.

Gray, D.E. (2004). *Doing research in the real world*. London: SAGE.

Greasley, P. and Cassidy, A. (2010). When it comes round to marking assignments: how to impress and how to 'distress' lecturers …. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, **35**(2), pp.173-189.

Guardado, M. and Shi, L. (2007). ESL students' experiences of online peer feedback, *Computers and Composition,* **24**(4), pp.443–461.

Guba, E. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1981). *Effective evaluation.* San Francisco; London: Jossey-Bass.

Hammersley, M. (2008). Troubles with triangulation. In: Bergman, M.M., ed. *Advances in mixed methods research.* London: SAGE, pp.22-36.

Hartley, J. and Chesworth, K. (2000). Qualitative and quantitative methods in research on essay writing: no one way. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, **24**(1), pp.15-24.

Hayes, J.R. (1996). A new framework for understanding cognition and affect in writing. In: Levy, C.M. and Ransdell, S., eds. *The science of writing*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erbaum Associates, Publishers, pp.1-29.

Hedgcock, J. and Lefkowitz, N. (1994). Feedback on feedback: assessing learner receptivity to teacher response in L2 composing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **3**(2), pp.141-163.

Hermerschmidt, M. (1999). Foregrounding background in academic learning. In: Jones, C., *et al*., eds. *Students writing in the university: cultural and epistemological issues*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp.6-16.

Hewett, B. (2000). Characteristics of interactive oral and computer-mediated peer group talk and its influence on revision. *Computers and Composition,* **17**(3), pp.265–288.

Hidi, S. and Boscolo, P. (2006). Motivation and writing. In: MacArthur, C.A., Graham, S. and Fitzgerald, J., eds. *Handbook of writing research*. New York: Guilford Press, pp.144-158.

Hitchcock, G. and Hughes, D. (1995). *Research and the teacher: a qualitative introduction to school-based research*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Holstein, J.A. and Gubrium, J.F. (1995). *The active interview.* California: SAGE Publications.

Holsti, O. (1969). *Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities*. Don Mills:Addison-Wesley.

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/about/profile/ accessed 10 August 2008.

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/learning_english/ accessed 17 March 2009.

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wie accessed 9 November 2009.

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wie/courses/postgraduate/higherdegrees/ accessed 10 November 2009.

Hyland, F. (1998). The impact of teacher written feedback on individual writer. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **7**(3), pp.255–286.

Hyland, F. (2000). ESL writers and feedback: giving more autonomy to students. *Language Teaching Research,* **4**(1), pp.33–54.

Hyland, F. and Hyland, K. (2001). Sugaring the pill: Praise and criticism in written feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **10**(3), pp.185– 212.

Hyland, F. and Lo, M.M. (2006). Examining interaction in the teaching practicum: issues of language, power and control. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, **14**(2), pp.163-186.

Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary discourses.* London: Pearson Education Limited.

352

Hyland, K. (2002). *Teaching and researching writing*. London: Pearson Education.

Hyland, K. (2003a). *Second language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hyland, K. (2003b). Genre-based pedagogies: A social response to process. *Journal of second language writing*, **12**(1), pp.17-29.

Hyland, K. and Hyland, F. (2006b). Interpersonal aspects of response: Constructing and interpreting teacher written feedback. In: Hyland, K. and Hyland, F., eds. *Feedback in second language writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp.206-224.

Hyland, K. and Hyland, F., eds. (2006a). *Feedback in second language writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Irons, A. (2008). *Enhancing learning through formative assessment and feedback.* London; New York: Routledge.

Ivanič, R. (1998). *Writing and identity*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Ivanič, R. (2004). Discourses of writing and learning to write. *Language and Education*, **18**(3), pp.220-245.

Ivanič, R. and Lea, M.R. (2006). New contexts, new challenges: the teaching of writing in UK higher education. In: Ganobcsik-Williams, L. ed. *Teaching Academic Writing in UK higher education.* New York: Palgrave Macmillian, pp.6-15.

Ivanič, R., Clark, R. and Rimmershaw, R. (2000). What am I supposed to make of this? The Messages Conveyed to Students by Tutors' Written Comments. In: Lea, M.R. and

Stierer, B., eds. *Student Writing in Higher Education.* Buckingham: Open University Press, pp.47-65.

Jacobs, G. M., *et al*. (1998). Feedback on student writing: taking the middle path. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **7**(3), pp.307-317.

James, M. (1998). *Using assessment for school improvement*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational.

Johnson, J.C. and Weller, S.C. (2001). Elicitation techniques in interviewing. In: Gubrium, J. F. and Holstein, J.A., eds. *Handbook of interview research*. California: SAGE Publications, pp.491–514.

Jones, C. (1999). The student from overseas and the British university. In: Jones, C., *et al*., eds. *Students writing in the university: cultural and epistemological issues.* Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp.37-56.

Jones, C., Turner, J. and Street, B., eds. (1999). *Students writing in the university: cultural and epistemological issues*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Kaplan, R.B. and Flum, H. (2010). Achievement goal orientations and identity formation styles. *Educational Research Review*, **5**(1), pp.50–67.

Keh, C.L. (1990). Feedback in the writing process: a model and methods for implementation. *ELT Journal*, **44**(4), pp.294-304.

Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews*. London: SAGE Publications.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lea, M.R. (1998). Academic literacies and learning in higher education: constructing knowledge through texts and experience. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, **30**(2), pp.156 -171.

Lea, M.R. (2000). Computer conferencing: new possibilities for writing and learning in Higher Education. In: Lea, M.R. and Stierer, B., eds. *Student writing in higher education*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press, pp.69-85.

Lea, M.R. and Street, B. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach, *Studies in Higher Education*, **23**(2), pp. 157-172.

Lea, M.R. and Street, B. (1999). Writing as academic literacies: understanding textual practices in higher education.  In: Candin, N. and Hyland, K., eds. *Writing: texts, processes and practices.* New York & London: Longman, pp.62-81.

Lea, M.R. and Street, B. (2000). Student writing and staff feedback in higher education: an academic literacies approach. In: Lea, M.R. and Stierer, B., eds. *Student writing in higher education*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press, pp.32-47.

Leki, I. (1990). Coaching from the margins: issues in written response. In: Kroll, B., ed. *Second language writing: research insights for the classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.57-98.

Leki, I. (2000). Commentary L2 writing: a commentary. *Learning and Instruction*. **10**(1), pp.101–105.

Leki, I. (2006). "You cannot ignore": L2 graduate students' response to discipline-based written feedback. In: Hyland, K. and Hyland, F., eds. *Feedback in second language writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp.266-286.

Leki, I. and Carson, J.G. (1997). Completely different worlds': EAP and the writing experiences of ESL Students in university courses. *TESOL Quarterly,* **31**(1), pp.39-69.

Licht, B.G. and Dweck, C.S. (1983). Sex differences in achievement orientations: consequences for academic choices and attainments. In: Marland, M., ed. *Sex differentiation and Schooling*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, pp.72-97.

Lillis, T. (1999). Essayist literacy and the institutional practice of mystery. In: Jones, C., *et al*., eds. *Students writing in the university: cultural and epistemological issues*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp.127-145.

Lillis, T. (2003). Student Writing as 'Academic Literacies': Drawing on Bakhtin to Move from Critique to Design. *Language and Education,* **17**(3), pp.192-207.

Lillis, T. (2006). Moving towards an 'academic Literacies' Pedagogy: Dialogues of Participation. In: Ganobcsik-Williams, L., ed. *Teaching Academic Writing in UK higher education.* Palgrave Macmillian, pp.30-45.

Liu, J. and Hansen, J.G. (2002). *Peer response in second language writing classrooms.* Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Macbeth, K.P. (2009). Deliberate false provisions: The use and usefulness of models in learning academic writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **19**(1), pp.33-48.

Mangelsdorf, K. (1992). Peer reviews in the ESL composition classroom: what do the students think? *ELT Journal*, **46**(3), pp.274-284.

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching*. London: SAGE Publications.

Matsuda, P.K., *et al.* (2003). Changing currents in second language writing research: A colloquium. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **12**(2), pp.151–179.

May, T. (1997). *Social research: issues, methods and process*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

McLean, P. and Ransom, L. (2005). Building intercultural competencies: implications for academic skills development. In: Carroll, J. and Ryan, J., eds. *Teaching international students*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 45-62.

Mendonça, C.O. and Johnson K.E. (1994). Peer review negotiations: revision activities in ESL writing instruction. *Tesol Quarterly*, **28**(4), pp.745-769.

Merriam, S.B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education: Revised and expanded from case study research in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.; London: SAGE.

Miller, J. and Glassner, B. (1997). The 'inside' and the 'outside': finding realities in interviews. In: Silverman, D., ed. *Qualitative research: Theory, Method and Practice*. London: SAGE Publications, pp.99 -112.

Milton, J. (2006). Resource-rich Web-based feedback: helping learners become independent writers. In: Hyland, K. and Hyland, F., eds. *Feedback in second language writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp.123-139.

Min, H.T. (2005). Training students to become successful peer reviewers. *System*, **33**(2), pp.293–308.

Morita, N. (2004). Negotiating participation and identity in second language academic communities. *TESOL Quarterly*, **38**(4), pp.573-603.

Mu, C. and Carrington, S. (2007). An investigation of three Chinese students' English writing strategies. *Teaching English as a second or foreign language,* **11**(1), pp.1-23.

Muijs, D.  (2004). *Doing quantitative research in education with SPSS*. London: Thousand Oaks.

Muncie, J. (2000). Using written teacher feedback in EFL composition Classes. *ELT Journal*, **54**(1), pp.47-53.

Nelson G.L. and Murphy J.M. (1992). An L2 Writing Group: Task and Social Dimensions. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **1**(3), pp.171-193.

Nelson, G.L. and Carson, J.G. (1998). ESL Students' perceptions of effectiveness in peer response groups. *Journal of Second Language Writing,* **7**(2), pp.113-131.

Nelson, G.L. and Carson, J.G. (2006). Cultural issues in peer response: revising "culture". In: Hyland, K. & Hyland, F. eds. *Feedback in second language writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp.42- 59.

Northedge, A. (2003). Rethinking teaching in the context of diversity. *Teaching in Higher Education*, **8**(1), pp.17-32.

Norton, L. (2004). Using assessment criteria as learning criteria: a case study in psychology. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, **29**(6), pp.687-702.

O'Donovan, B., Price, M. and Rust, C. (2004). Know what I mean? Enhancing student understanding of assessment standards and criteria. *Teaching in Higher Education,* **9**(3), pp.325–335.

Osgood, C.E., Suci, G.J. and Tannenbaum, P.H. (1957). *The measurement of meaning*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Pajares, F. (1996). Self-Efficacy beliefs in academic settings. *Review of Educational Research*, **66**(4), pp.543-578.

Pajares, F. and Valiante, G. (2006). Self-efficacy beliefs and motivation in writing development. In: MacArthur, C.A., Graham, S. and Fitzgerald, J., eds. *Handbook of writing research*. New York: Guilford Press, pp.158-170.

Pardoe, S. (2000). A question of attribution: the indeterminacy of 'learning from experience'. In: Lea, M.R and Stierer, B., eds. *Student writing in higher education*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press, pp.125-146.

Patthey-Chavez, G.G. and Ferris, D.R. (1997). Writing conferences and the weaving of multi-voiced texts in college composition. *Research in the Teaching of English*, **31**(1), pp.51-90.

Paulus, T.M. (1999). The effect of peer and teacher feedback on student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **8**(3), pp.265-289.

Peräkylä, A. (1997). Reliability and validity in research based on naturally occurring social interaction. In: Silverman, D., ed. *Qualitative research: Theory, Method and Practice*. London: SAGE Publications, pp.201-220.

Petelin, R. (2010). *Writing seven days a week: sustaining a writing program for postgraduate students. Paper presented at WDHE Conference*, London, June 28-30 2010. Royal College of Physicians.

Peterson, S. (2006). Influence of gender on writing development. In: MacArthur, C.A., Graham, S. and Fitzgerald, J., eds. *Handbook of writing research*. New York: Guilford Press, pp.311-323.

Poland, B.D. (2001). Transcript quality. In: Gubrium, J.F. and Holstein, J.A., eds. *Handbook of interview research.* California: SAGE Publications, pp.629-650.

Prior, P. (1991). Contextualizing writing and response in a graduate *seminar. Written Communication*, **8**(3), pp.267-310.

Prior, P. (1998). *Writing/Disciplinarity.* New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Prior, P. (2006). A sociocultural theory of writing. In: MacArthur, C.A., Graham, S. and Fitzgerald, J., eds. *Handbook of writing research*. New York: Guilford Press, pp.54-66.

Prosser, M. and Trigwell, K. (1999). *Understanding learning & teaching: the experience in Higher Education*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Radecki, P.M. and Swales, J.M. (1988). ESL student reaction to written comments on their written work. *System,* **16**(3), pp.355-365.

Ramsden, P. (1992). *Learning to teach in higher education.* London: Routledge.

Rapley, T. (2003). The art(fulness) of open-ended interviewing: some considerations on analysing interviews. *Qualitative Research,* **1**(3), pp.303-323.

Rapley, T. (2007). *Doing conversation, discourse and document analysis*. London: SAGE Publications.

Read, B., Francis, B. and Robson, J. (2005). Gender, 'bias', assessment and feedback: analysing the written assessment of undergraduate history essays. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education,* **30**(3), pp.241-260.

Riazi, A. (1997). Acquiring disciplinary literacy: A social-cognitive analysis of text production and learning among Iranian graduate students of education. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **6**(2), pp.105-137.

Robertson, S. (2008). *International students in the UK: interesting facts*. [Online]. (URL http://globalhighered.wordpress.com/2008/05/08/international-students-in-the-uk-interesting-facts/). (Accessed 15 November 2009).

Robson, C. (1993). *Real world research.* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell Publishing.

Robson, C. (2002). *Real world research.* 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Ruspini, E. (2002). *An introduction to longitudinal research*. London: Routledge.

Russell, D.R., *et al.* (2009). Exploring notions of genre in "Academic Literacies" and "Writing Across the Curriculum": approaches across countries and contexts. In: Bazerman, C. *et al.,* eds. *Genre in a Changing World*. Fort Collins, Colorado: The WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor, Press. Available at http://wac.colostate.edu/books/genre/, pp.395-423.

Rust, C. (2002). The impact of assessment on student learning. *Active Learning in Higher Education,* **3**(2), pp.145–158.

Rust, C., O'Donovan, B. and Price, M. (2005). A social constructivist assessment process model: how the research literature shows us this could be best practice. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, **30**(3), pp.231-240.

Rust, C., Price, M. and O'Donovan, B. (2003). Improving students' learning by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and processes. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, **28**(2), pp.147-164.

Ryan, J. (2000). *A guide to teaching international students*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.

Ryan, J. and Carroll, J. (2005). *Teaching international students: improving learning for all.* London; New York: Routledge.

Sadler, D.R. (1989). Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science,* **18**(2), pp.119-144.

Saldaña, J. (2003). *Longitudinal qualitative research*. California: AltaMira Press.

Samraj, B. (2002). Texts and contextual layers: academic writing in content courses. In: Johns, A.M., ed. *Genre in the classroom: Multiple perspectives.* Mahwah; London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.163-178.

Santos, I.M. (2007). *Designing and implementing strategies that create and sustain online learning communities: the case of a post-graduate online course*. Ph.D. thesis. University of Warwick.

Schneider, M.L. and Fugishima, N. (1995). When practice doesn't make perfect: the case of a graduate ESL student. In: Belcher, D. and Braine, G., eds. *Academic writing in a second language: essays on research and pedagogy*. New Jersey: Ablex publishing Corporation, pp.3-22.

Shay, S. (2008). Beyond social constructivist perspectives on assessment: the centring of knowledge. *Teaching in Higher Education*, **13**(5), pp. 595-605.

Sikes, P. (2000). 'Truth' and 'lies' revisited. *British Educational Research Journal*, **26**(2), pp.257-270.

Silva, T. (1993). Source toward an understanding of the distinct nature of L2 writing: the ESL research and its implications. *TESOL Quarterly*, **27**(4), pp.657-677.

Silverman, D. (2000). *Doing qualitative research*. London: SAGE Publications.

Silverman, D. (2001). *Interpreting qualitative data*. London: SAGE Publications.

Spack, R. (1997). The rhetorical construction of multilingual students. *TESOL Quarterly*, **31**(4), pp.765-774.

Spack, R. (1998). Initiating ESL students into the academic discourse community: how far should we go? In: Zamel. V. and Spack, R., eds. *Negotiating academic literacies*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, pp.85-104.

Stanley, J. (1992). Coaching student writers to be effective peer evaluators. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **1**(3), pp.217-233.

Stierer, B. (2000). Schoolteachers as students: academic literacy and the construction of professional knowledge within Master's Courses in Education. In: Lea, M.R. and Stierer, B., eds. *Student writing in higher education*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press, pp.179-198.

Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swann, J. and Ecclestone, K. (1999). 'Improving lecturers' assessment practice in higher education: a problem-based approach. *Educational Action Research*, **7**(1), pp.63-87.

Tardy, C.M. (2006). Researching first and second language genre learning: A comparative review and a look ahead. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **15**(2), pp.79–101.

Tashakkori, A. and Teddlie, C. (2003). *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioural research*. California: SAGE Publications.

Teddlie, C. and Tashakkori, A. (2009). *Foundations of mixed methods research: integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches in the social and behavioural.* Los Angeles: SAGE.

Timperley, H.S. and Parr, J.M. (2009). What is this lesson about? Instructional processes and student understandings in writing classrooms. *Curriculum Journal*, **20**(1), pp.43-60.

Tsui, A.B. and Ng, M. (2000). Do secondary L2 writers benefit from peer comments? *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **9**(2), pp.147-170.

Tuzi, F. (2004). The impact of e-feedback on the revisions of L2 writers in an academic writing course. *Computers and Composition*, **21**(2), pp.217-235.

Villamil O.S. and De Guerrero M.C.M. (1996). Peer revision in the L2 classroom: social-cognitive activities, mediating strategies, and aspects of social behavior. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **5**(1), pp.51-75.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ware, P.D. and Warschauer, M. (2006). Electronic feedback and second language writing. In: Hyland, K. and Hyland, F., eds. *Feedback in second language writing.* New York: Cambridge University Press, pp.105-122.

Watkins, D.A. and Biggs, J.B. (1996). *The Chinese learner: cultural, psychological, and contextual influences*. Hong Kong; Camberwell, Melbourne: ACER.

Weaver, M.R. (2006). Do students value feedback? Student perceptions of tutors' written responses. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education,* **31**(3), pp.379–394.

Weiner, B. (1972). Attribution theory, achievement motivation, and the educational process. *Review of Educational Research*, **42**(2), pp.203-215.

Weiner, B. (1974). *Achievement motivation and attribution theory*. New Jersey: General Learning Corporation.

Weissberg, R. (2006). Scaffolded feedback; tutorial conversations with advanced L2 writers. In: Hyland, K. and Hyland, F., eds. *Feedback in second language writing.* New York: Cambridge University Press, pp.246-265.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Widmer, T. *et al*. (2008). Analysis with APES, the Actor Process Event Scheme. In: Bergman, M.M., ed. *Advances in mixed methods research*. London: SAGE, pp.150-171.

Wotjas, O. (1998). Feedback? No, just give us answers. *Times Higher Education Supplement.* 25.

Wray, D. (2007). *The writing attributions of beginning teachers: an exploratory study. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference*, London, September 5-8 2007. Institute of Education, University of London.

Yin, R.K. (1994). *Case study research: design and methods*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE.

Yin, R.K. (2003). *Case study research: design and methods*. London: SAGE Publications.

Zamel, V. (1983). The composing processes of advanced ESL students: Six case studies. *TESOL Quarterly*, **17**(2), pp.165-187.

Zamel, V. (1985). Responding to student writing. *TESOL Quarterly*, **19**(1), pp.79-101.

Zamel, V. (1998). Questioning academic discourse. In: Zamel, V. and Spack, R., eds. *Negotiating academic literacies: teaching and learning across languages and cultures.* London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.187-199.

Zhang, S. (1995). Reexamining the affective advantage of peer feedback in the ESL writing class. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **4**(3), pp.209-222.

Zhu, W. (2001). Interaction and feedback in mixed peer response groups. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, **10**(4), pp. 251–276.

Zimmerman, B.J. and Bandura, A. (1994). Impact of self-regulatory influences on writing course attainment. *American Educational Research Journal*, **31**(4), pp.845-862.

Zimmerman, B.J., Bandura, A. and Martinez-Pons, M. (1992). Self-motivation for academic attainment: the role of self-efficacy beliefs and personal goal setting. *American Educational Research Journal,* **29**(3), pp.663-676.

# List of Appendixes

**Composing strategies used by writers (based on Riazi 1997)**

| Composing strategy | Constituents |
| --- | --- |
| *Cognitive strategies*<br><br>**Interacting with the materials to be used in writing by manipulating them mentally or physically** | Note-making<br>Elaboration<br>Use of mother tongue knowledge and skill transfer from L1<br>Inferencing<br>Drafting (revising and editing) |
| *Metacognitive Strategies*<br><br>**Executive processes used to plan, monitor, and evaluate a writing task** | Assigning goals<br>Planning (making & changing outlines)<br>Rationalising appropriate formats<br>Monitoring & Evaluation |
| *Social Strategies*<br><br>**Interacting with other persons to assist in performing the task or to gain affective control** | Appealing for clarifications<br>Getting feedback from tutors & peers |
| *Search Strategies*<br><br>**Searching and using supporting sources** | Searching and using libraries<br>Using guidelines<br>Using others' writing as model |

**Mitigation strategies (based on Hyland 2003a)**

**Paired comments** – Combining criticism with either praise or a suggestion

*e.g. Good movement from general to specific, but you need to make a clearer promise to the reader*

**Hedged comments –** Modal verbs, imprecise quantifiers, usuality devices

*e.g. Some of the materials seemed a little long-winded and I wonder if it could have been compressed a little*

**Personal attribution** – teacher responds as ordinary reader rather than as expert

*e.g. I'm sorry, but when reading this essay I couldn't see any evidence of this really. Perhaps you should have given me your outline to look at with the essay.*

**Interrogative form** – express element of doubt or uncertainty in the comment

*e.g. The first two paragraphs – do they need joining?*

## Consent form 1

**Study Purpose**

I am a doctoral student at Warwick Institute of Education researching the students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers and of academic writing process. This research focuses on how different writing practices (e.g. academic writing classes, tutors' feedback, peer feedback, etc.) inter-relate and impact on the students' beliefs of themselves as academic writers and their assignments.

**Participant requirements**

You will be asked to share your writing experiences during the semi-structured interviews, which will be carried during this academic year and tape-recorded to document accurately all the valuable information provided by the interviewees. You will be also asked to share with the researcher the rough drafts and final versions of your writings to be analyzed in terms of tracking the changes and their sources, so as to learn about your writing development over this course of study. Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw at any time without any consequences.

**Privacy**

Your responses will be treated confidentially and any quotations will not be attributed to particular students, no names will be used.

**Data usage**

Survey responses, the interviewees' narratives as well as the text analysis of students' writings will be used to conduct research for my doctoral degree. A final report will be

available for all the participants in the research. The information that you provide is subject to the protection of the Data Protection Act 1998, and will not be used for any alternative purpose without your consent.

Data and other information related to the study, which will not contain any of interviewees' names, will also be available to the supervisors: Prof. David Wray and Dr. Val Brooks.

For more information, you may contact me directly using the following contact details at any time:

Oxana Poverjuc
Full Time Mhil/PhD in Education 2006/09
Warwick Institute of Education
Email:O.Poverjuc@warwick.ac.uk
M: 07988548305

**Consent Agreement for Research Participation**

I hereby give my consent to participate as a subject in the study entitled 'Investigating Students' Perceptions of Themselves as Academic Writers and Academic Writing Process'. I acknowledge that I have read the Research information page and I am aware that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time without any consequences should I so choose.

Signed _____          Date _____

**Consent form 2**

**Investigating Students' Perceptions of Themselves as Academic Writers and of Academic Writing Processes: a research project**

**Consent form**

**Purpose of the research**

This research explores students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers and of the academic writing process. It focuses on how different writing practices (e.g. academic writing classes, tutors' feedback, peer feedback, etc.) inter-relate and impact on students' beliefs about themselves as academic writers and on their written work, and on how these beliefs evolve through the academic year 2007/2008.

**Participant Requirements**

You will be asked to share your writing experiences during a series of tape-recorded, semi-structured interviews during this academic year. You will be also asked to share with the researcher rough draft and final versions of your writings or any other notes about writings made in your journal provided for you. These will be used to facilitate discussion about the processes you undergo while writing your assignments. It is expected that there will be between 6 to 9 interviews depending on the numbers of the assignments required to complete your academic course.

Your participation in this study will be paid. You will receive £10 per interview which normally lasts about 1 hour, with an expected time commitment over the year of 10 hours. Payment will be made at the end of each term.

**Consent Agreement for Research Participation**

I hereby give my consent to participate as a subject in the study entitled 'Investigating Students' Perceptions of Themselves as Academic Writers and of Academic Writing Processes'. I acknowledge that I have read the participant requirements and I am aware about what is expected from my participation in this research.

Name (please print) _____   Signed _____

Date _____

# Warwick Institute *of* Education

**Questionnaire on Students' Perceptions of Themselves as Academic Writers and the Academic Writing Process**

The purpose of this questionnaire is to obtain your views on your writing proficiency and the impact of different practices on the development of your writing. Your answers will be treated confidentially and no particular name will be revealed. The questionnaire should take about 10 minutes to complete. Please tick the appropriate boxes. On a few occasions, you are asked to provide written answer.

Thank you for your assistance!

**A. Background information**

Sex             □ Female        □ Male

Age category     □ 20 – 29   □ 30 – 39   □ 40 – 49   □ 50 – 59   □ 60 plus

Please specify if English is your mother language
        □ Yes
        □ No

Current course of study: _____

**B. Your experience of academic writing**

Think about your most recent substantial experience of education (e.g. your degree course). Please respond to the following questions with reference to that academic experience by ticking the most appropriate boxes.

1.  In my previous course, I had to write:

    □ frequently          □ sometimes          □ hardly at all

2.  Please indicate how many times in your previous course of study you have experienced the following writing practices by ticking the most appropriate boxes.

| Writing experiences | Frequently (> 3 times) | Sometimes (1-3 times) | Never |
|---|---|---|---|
| I took a class in academic writing | | | |
| I worked on collaborative writing tasks with other students | | | |
| I discussed my own writing with other students | | | |
| I received help with my own writing from my teacher/tutor | | | |

3.  Rate the usefulness of the following practices in developing your writing skills. Please circle the most appropriate number using a scale where **1** = **very useful** and **5** = **not at all useful**, and **NE** = **No experience**.

Academic writing class                          1   2   3   4   5   NE

Collaborative writing tasks with other students   1   2   3   4   5   NE

Discussions with other students                 1   2   3   4   5   NE

Teacher/tutor's help with writing               1   2   3   4   5   NE

4. How many times did you do the following types of writing during your most recent substantial experience of education? Tick any that apply.

| Types of writing | Frequently (>3 times per year) | Sometimes (1 – 3 times per year) | Never |
|---|---|---|---|
| Essay (e.g. piece of writing usually from an author's personal viewpoint) | | | |
| Report (e.g. an account of a conducted experiment or a survey) | | | |
| Creative writing (e.g. an imaginative piece of writing) | | | |
| Literature review (e.g. an account of what has been published on a topic by scholars, researchers) | | | |
| Thesis (e.g. a piece of writing usually involving personal research, written as part of university degree) | | | |
| Summary (e.g. a concise description of certain material) | | | |
| Statistical presentation (an account of numerical data) | | | |
| Critique (e.g. an evaluation of a book, article, film in the light of specific issues and theoretical concerns) | | | |

5. Please rate the following features of academic writing **in order of importance** by using a scale of **1** for the **most important** to **7** for the **least important**.

    __ Logical organization of arguments
    __ Correct and consistent referencing
    __ Originality of ideas
    __ Clear expression of ideas
    __ Correctness in grammar, spelling, and punctuation
    __ Appropriate use of language and structures for the discipline in
         which you are working
    __ Relevance of ideas to be included

**C. Your perceptions about writing**

6.  Please indicate how far you agree with the following statements about yourself as a writer.

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I am able to organize my arguments logically | | | | | |
| I am able to express my ideas clearly | | | | | |
| I am good at text mechanics (i.e. grammar, punctuation, spelling) | | | | | |
| I am aware of marker expectations | | | | | |
| I am aware of assessment criteria | | | | | |
| I think I am a good writer | | | | | |
| Tutors who have assessed my writings think I am a good writer. | | | | | |
| Other students who have read my writings think I am a good writer. | | | | | |

7.  Please indicate how you feel about the following statements about writing.

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I enjoy writing | | | | | |
| Writing helps me to learn | | | | | |
| Writing is a means to assess my progress throughout my course | | | | | |
| Discussing writing with my tutors is a useful experience | | | | | |
| Discussing my writing with other students is a useful experience | | | | | |
| I often write for pleasure | | | | | |

8. Please indicate how you feel about the following statements.

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| It is crucial to plan before starting to write | | | | | |
| It is essential to revise the plan continuously while writing | | | | | |
| All academic writing should be drafted more than once | | | | | |
| It is essential to consider the markers' expectations before starting to write | | | | | |
| Being aware of the assessment criteria is important | | | | | |
| Receiving tutors' feedback on a draft version is important | | | | | |
| Receiving students' comments on a draft version is important | | | | | |
| Attending sessions on academic writing in which pieces of good writing are modelled is important | | | | | |
| The final draft should always be edited (i.e. checked for meaning mistakes, grammar or spelling mistakes) | | | | | |
| Other (please specify) | | | | | |

9. Think about the most recent piece of academic writing you have completed (e.g. your degree course dissertation, an examination essay). Please respond to the following statements with reference to that writing experience by circling the most appropriate number on a scale where **1** = **very easy** and **5** = **very difficult**.

Understanding the demands of writing tasks      1  2  3  4  5

Understanding the marker's expectations      1  2  3  4  5

Expressing my ideas clearly      1  2  3  4  5

Developing my arguments logically      1  2  3  4  5

Considering the assessment criteria      1  2  3  4  5

Referencing correctly and consistently      1  2  3  4  5

Writing with grammatical accuracy      1  2  3  4  5

Selecting the most relevant material      1  2  3  4  5

10.     Please indicate if you are interested in receiving a summary of the findings of this study. If yes, fill in the information below. The information will remain confidential.

Email address:_____

Thank you again for your participation!

End of the questionnaire

**The interview schedule 1**

1. **Opening remarks/Creating good rapport**

Thank the student for his/her willingness to take part in the interview

Describe the nature of the study and the purpose of the interview

Declare the confidentiality and anonymity of the informant

Ask if they have any further questions

Introduction to the first research question

2. **(Sub Research Question) What are students' prior writing experiences?**

- What was your previous course of study? What kind of prior writing experiences have you got? How much have you written in your previous course of study? Did you get any support about your writing? Any training?

  - Amount
  - Provided support
  - Enjoyment/dislike
  - Any sessions on writing/composing

- Do you feel that the prior writing experiences/training/support is going to help you with your current course?
- How exactly will this help you?
- Why do you think so?

3. **(Research Question) What are students' perceptions of themselves as writers?**

- How do you feel about writing academic assignments?

  - Confident
  - not sure

- struggling

- Have you got anything that seems very difficult and challenging for you when you write an assignment? Can you give some examples of them?

  - Difficulty in understanding the demands of assignment
  - The language barrier
  - The topic

- What do you think might help to overcome them (referring to the ones they identify themselves)?

4. **(Research Question) What are students' perceptions of the academic writing practices that they have experienced?**

   - What have you found the most helpful in improving the quality of your writing? To what extent have these significant activities contributed to that development?

     - Support                              Persistence
     - Practising writing                    Learning rules
     - Reading a lot                  Imitating other writers
     - Inviting others to comment on your writing
     - Feedback
     - Rewriting till satisfied understand the process of writing

   - What are opinions about the sessions on academic writing that you have undertaken? What did they cover/entail?
   - Why do you feel that?
   - How do you find the tutor's feedback/support?
   - What about peer feedback?

5. **(Research Question) What are students' perceptions of writing process?**

   - What do you think the main purpose of writing is?

     -                    Learning
     -                    Assessment
     -                    Teaching

   - Could you please refer to your last piece of written work? How did you feel about completing it? What were the difficulties you had coped with or what were the things you had enjoyed when writing?

**Ending**

- If you are asked to make up a wish list of the most helpful support to you what would you include?
- Could you list the main qualities that a good writer should possess?

Finally, is there anything else you want to say about this topic, that I haven't asked you?

Then to round off:

- Is there anything else that you want to ask me?
- With your permission, may I come again in the future?
- Would you like a copy of the interview transcript? Mention data verification.

Thank you for your time, that has been most interesting!

**The interview schedule 2**

---

**Opening remarks/Creating good rapport**

Thank the student for his/her willingness to take part in the interview

Describe the nature of the study and the purpose of the interview

Declare the confidentiality and anonymity of the informant

Ask if they have any further questions

Introduction to the first research question

**(Sub Research Question) General Overview**

- How have you been getting on with your assignment?

**(Research Question) What are students' perceptions of writing process?**

- What do you concentrate on when you are given a writing task? What influences your decisions about what you should write in your assignment?

    - Assessment criteria

    - Assignment demands

    - Taught sessions

- How do you start writing an assignment? (getting sense of the stages they go through, and in what order, what they do at each stage)

    - Planning

    - Reviewing literature

    - Discussing the topic with other students

    - Ask tutor for help

- What do you do next?

- Why do you do in that way?

---

- What do you do when you feel stuck with your writing?

  - Reading the title/essay again

  - Revising the plan

  - Discussing with other students

- Have you revised it?

- How long did you spend revising this draft?

- Each time you return to it, what do you do? How do you start?

- What were the major changes you have made to this draft?

- What do you think was the most important change you made to the draft?

**(Research Question) Students' perception of their development of writing skills and the quality of their academic texts.**

- When you look at your drafts that you have carried out, do you feel satisfied with your revisions? Do you feel that the essay has improved? How?

- Is there anything about writing that you learnt from writing this essay that you will remember and use in the future?

**(Research Question) What are students' perceptions of themselves as writers?**

- How do you feel about writing this particular academic assignment?

  - Confident

  - not sure

  - struggling

- Have you got anything that seems very difficult and challenging for you when you wrote it? Can you give some examples of them?

  - Difficulty in understanding the demands of assignment

  - The language barrier

  - The topic

- What do you think might help to overcome them (referring to the ones they identify

385

themselves)?

**(Research Question) What are students' perceptions of the academic writing practices that they experienced in the current course?**

- What have you found the most helpful in improving the quality of your writing? To what extent have these significant activities contributed to that development?

  - Support                                        Persistence

  - Practising writing                         Learning rules

  - Reading a lot                         Imitating other writers

  - Inviting others to comment on your writing

  - Feedback

  - Rewriting till satisfied understand the process of writing

- What are opinions about the sessions on academic writing? What did they cover/entail?

- Why do you feel that?

- How do you find the tutor's feedback/support?

- What about peer feedback?

Finally, is there anything else you want to say about this topic, that I haven't asked you?

Then to round off:

- Is there anything else that you want to ask me?

- With your permission, may I come again in the future?

- Would you like a copy of the interview transcript? Mention data verification.

Thank you for your time, that has been most interesting!

**Interview schedule 3**

Retrospective Interview

**Opening remarks/Creating good rapport**

Thank the student for his/her willingness to take part in interview

Remind about the nature of the study and the purpose of the interview

Declare the confidentiality and anonymity of the informant

Ask if they have any further questions

Introduction to the first research question

**Writing Process**

How have you found this academic year?

What was more challenging task or activity you have to accomplish during this year?

How did you find the writing tasks?

What aspects of writing do you feel that you have improved?

What exactly helped you to improve them?

What new things have you learnt about writing process?

Any strategies?

Any theories about writing?

What have you changed about your writing to fit the tutors' and course requirements?

What would you want be different about the support on academic the department provides?

University?

Tutors?

Finally, is there anything else you want to say about this topic, that I haven't asked you?

Then to round off:

Is there anything else that you want to ask me?

With your permission, may I come again in the future?

Would you like a copy of the interview transcript? Mention data verification.

Thank you for your time, that has been most interesting!

**Interview schedule with tutors**

**Opening remarks/Creating good rapport**

- Thank the tutor for his willingness to take part in the interview
- Describe the nature of the study and the purpose of the interview
- Declare the confidentiality and anonymity of the informant
- Introduction to the first research question

**Discussions on students' writing issues**

- What do you think are the biggest problems for ESL students when they write an academic essay?
- Do you think that there any specific writing issues particular for certain nationalities or groups?
- Why do you think some students have problems when writing an assignment?
- What do you usually suggest a student who has got difficulties in writing to do in order to overcome them?

**(Research Question) Perceptions of writing – referring to FRM assignments**

- What do you expect students to learn from writing these two assignments?
- What are the key features that you value the most when you mark these assignments?
- What are the criteria they have most difficulties in meeting?
- What of the academic writing conventions seem to need more explanations?
- What major areas do you think student had to pay more attention?
- What is the most helpful that we already do?
- What do you think would most help these students that we don't do?

**Discussions on written feedback**

- When you respond to the completed assignment, are there any aspects of the texts which you focus on more than others? What are they?

**Discussions on students' writings**

- If you compare all your tutees and the assignments they have completed, do you feel that they have made any progress as academic writers? In what areas?
- What do you think counts as 'good writing'?
- What do you think a student must know to write a good essay?


**Ending**

Finally, is there anything else you want to say about this topic, that I haven't asked you?
Then to round off:
- Is there anything else that you want to ask me?
- Would you like a copy of the interview transcript? Mention data verification.

Thank you for your time, that has been most interesting!

**Themes identified by a colleague**

---

1. **Writing stages**
   - Preparation: reading bibliography, reading samples of previous essays, talking to friends, outlining a plan
     - Writing: practical and personal related issues first, theoretical issues second
     - "Catching up" – talking to friends and colleagues, checking
     - Revision: cutting words, checking grammar and rephrasing
   - After grading and improving writing: structure and addressing specificity and grammar issues

2. **Reaction to grading**
   - emotional impact: distress, guilt, sadness, confidence depending on the result
   - cognitions (thinking) about reasons for result: a.) mixed about negative experiences of writing, some due to lack of understanding from the reader (external), some due to personal difficulties associated with guilt and sadness (internal); b.) internal for positive experience of writing (liking the subject, relating to personal experiences)

3. **Sources of support**
   - tutor's support and clarifications
   - friends' support
   - reading samples of essays from previous years
   - checking progress with colleagues & friends

4. **Sources of confidence**
   - good results & feedback
   - more time for preparation and revision
   - liking the topic: practical and familiar
   - having appropriate support
   - similarity with what others do
   - previous experience in writing (guilt if this is not well used)

5. **Sources of difficulty**
   - essay questions itself: too broad, too theoretical
   - reading list (hard to manage)
   - getting started
   - specificity linked to word limit: how specific? Too vague? Too general?

**The support provided for Rita's writing processes**

| Rita | A1 | A2 | A3 | A4 | A5 | A6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Small group tutorial | + | + | + | _ | _ | _ |
| Individualised tutorial during writing processes | _ | _ | _ | _ | +/+ | + |
| Electronic communication | + | + | + | + | + | + |
| Individualised tutorial after receiving written feedback | _ | _ | _ | _ | + | _ |
| Oral presentation | _ | _ | _ | _ | + | _ |
| Writing conference | + | _ | _ | + | _ | _ |
| Use of published guidelines | + | _ | + | + | + | + |
| Peer feedback | + | + | _ | _ | + | _ |
| Marks | B | B | C | C | Failed | C |

**The support provided for Oliver's writing processes**

| **Oliver** | A1 | A2 | A3 | A4 | A5 | A6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Small group tutorial | + | + | + | _ | _ | _ |
| Individualised tutorial during writing processes | _ | _ | _ | + | + | + |
| Electronic communication | + | + | + | _ | + | + |
| Individualised tutorial after receiving written feedback | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ |
| Oral presentation | _ | _ | _ | + | + | _ |
| Writing conference | + | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ |
| Peer feedback | _ | _ | _ | _ | + | + |
| Marks | C | C | B | B | C | Not known |

**The support provided for Hannah's writing processes**

| **Hannah** | A1 | A2 | A3 | A4 | A5 | A6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Small group tutorial | + | + | + | – | – | – |
| Individualised tutorial during writing processes | – | – | – | – | – | + |
| Electronic communication | + | + | + | – | – | + |
| Individualised tutorial after receiving written feedback | – | – | – | – | + | – |
| Oral presentation | – | – | – | + | – | – |
| Writing conference | + | – | – | – | + | – |
| Peer feedback | + | + | + | + | + | – |
| Marks | C | C | B | C | Failed | Not known |

**The support provided for Molly's writing processes**

| Molly | A1 | A2 | A3 | A4 | A5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Small group tutorial | + | + | + | + | + |
| Individualised tutorial during writing processes | _ | _ | _ | _ | + |
| Electronic communication | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ |
| Small group tutorial after receiving written feedback | _ | + | _ | _ | _ |
| Individualised tutorial after receiving written feedback | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ |
| Oral presentation | + | _ | _ | _ | + |
| Writing conference | + | _ | + | _ | + |
| Peer feedback | + | + | + | + | + |
| Marks | B+ | C+ | A | B | B |