

Thriving through Uncertainties: The Agency and Resourcefulness of First-Year Chinese English as an Additional Language Writers in a Canadian University

Jing Mao
University of Victoria

Abstract

Amidst the increased enrolment of international Chinese English as an additional language (EAL) students in North American universities, scholars have reported on their academic and social experiences in navigating English-medium studies (e.g., Liu, 2016; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Although informative, some studies focus on EAL learners' perceived deficient language proficiencies, and how these deficits can negatively impact their academic success. In contrast to studies based on deficit models, this study argues that participants exhibit agency as evidenced in their responses to challenges encountered in and changes to their perceptions of and practices in academic writing. Employing an ecological perspective and (second) language socialization theories (Duff, 2010, 2019; van Lier, 2004, 2008), this qualitative case study examined how six first-year Chinese EAL learners enacted their agency and resourcefulness when navigating their academic writing trajectories. Ultimately, this study's findings recommend that composition faculty, administrators, and EAL educators recognize EAL writers' agency in accessing multiple resources while acknowledging their writing challenges, providing an optimal learning environment, and empowering them to thrive in their mainstream composition studies.

The Importance and Challenge of Academic Writing for EAL Students

Since English functions as the dominant language for academic communication and scholarship globally, writing efficiently and appropriately in English is extremely important but often poses challenges for students who learn English as an additional language (EAL) (Hyland, 2013). As Hyland (2013) indicated, "we are what we write" (p. 53); therefore, students and researchers are defined and judged by how they write as academics. Additionally, an article by Jabeen et al. (2019) identified three main factors that play a role in EAL learners' academic experiences and performance: academic engagement, academic socialization, and social integrity. Among these factors, English language proficiency is considered a predictor that accounts for EAL learners' academic performance. Focusing on Chinese EAL learners (both at the graduate and undergraduate levels) at a Canadian university, Zhang and Zhou's (2010) study found that a lack of oral and written communication abilities were factors that prevented students' academic success. Although not specifically focused on academic writing, these studies have shown the importance and challenges of academic writing for EAL learners who aim to achieve academic success in English-medium Canadian universities, as well as the necessity for educators to support these students.

Chinese EAL Learners in Canadian Universities

Given the global trend towards and impact of the internationalization of higher education, an increasing number of international students, especially those from China, are studying in colleges and universities in Canada. Accordingly, Chinese EAL students (including the six participants in

this study) are one of the largest non-domestic student groups at Canadian universities. At both undergraduate and graduate levels, Chinese students account for approximately 30% of the total number of international students—a trend that has continued to increase yearly (CBIE, 2016). Therefore, researchers have paid attention to reports on the academic and social experiences of Chinese international students. Some studies have focused on the challenges, impacting factors, and outcomes of students' experiences (e.g., Liu, 2016; Preston & Wang, 2017; Zhang, 2011; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Although informative, some studies focused on EAL learners' perceived deficient language proficiencies and how these deficits can negatively impact their academic success. In contrast to this deficit model, a few other studies have paid attention to students' holistic experiences including both their struggles and successes, as well as their agency and dynamic changes in their academic performance (e.g., Anderson, 2017; Heng, 2018). Aligned with holistic studies focused on academic writing, this study investigated six Chinese EAL writers' experiences in navigating first-year composition courses in an English-medium Canadian university by drawing from ecological and language socialization approaches.

An Ecological Perspective on Language Learning and (Second) Language Academic Socialization

This study employed an ecological perspective and (second) language socialization as its theoretical framework. As a holistic and contextualized framework, an ecological approach does not view language learning as a product that is acquired; instead, this approach emphasizes that learning is a process that is emergent and relational to the environment on physical, symbolic, and social levels (Dufva, 2013; van Lier, 2004; 2008). As Steffensen and Kramsch (2017) summarized, the main tenets of ecological approaches to second language acquisition (SLA) are as follows: language learning and use are emergent; affordances in the environment play a crucial role; language plays a mediated function in education; and language learning experiences are subjective and historical. In essence, an ecological perspective regards language learning as holistic, situated, emergent, and dialogical within the interrelatedness of the whole environment.

In some researchers' exploration of the relationship between individual organisms and their environment, the notion of affordance and agency plays a key role from an ecological perspective. In language education, van Lier (2004) defined affordance as perceived opportunities for actions or dynamic relationships between the environment and active learners. According to van Lier, learning resources are not yet affordable until learners as agents perceive of, reflect on, and act on these resources, which involves a dynamic process of mutual interaction between learners and the environment. Another important concept of agency refers to the capacity to act, which is "mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional, and other contextual factors" (van Lier, 2008, p. 171). Defining agency in this way means that the capacity to learn is socially constructed. Also, van Lier (2008) proposed that three core features of learner agency: (1) initiative or self-regulation; (2) contextual interdependence; and, (3) responsibility for one's actions vis-à-vis the environment. Altogether, these features are helpful for examining EAL writers' agency in the current study.

In addition to an ecological perspective, the second theory that has guided this study is (second) language socialization (Duff, 2010; Duff & Talmy, 2011). Researchers operating within a language socialization theoretical framework investigate the activities and processes of

learning in which novices (newcomers) learn the language or cultural knowledge of a target community through “interactions with others who are more proficient in the language and its cultural practices” (Duff, 2010, p. 172). When it comes to adult additional language (L2) learners, their socialization processes differ from their first language (L1) counterparts. These adult L2 learners need to learn a non-native culture and literacy practice through an additional language despite having already been socialized into their L1 communities and having their own perspectives on issues such as identity and power relations (Steffensen & Kramsch, 2017). As Duff and Doherty (2015) theorized, learner agency plays a crucial role in facilitating or impeding the process of language socialization since “learners bring their agency to bear on the affordances of their personal context and the resources available to them” (p. 69). It is worth mentioning that learner agency has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years. For instance, Larsen-Freeman (2019) has conceptualized agency from a Complex Dynamics System Theory (CDST) perspective and discussed educational practices for supporting learner agency. These conceptual discussions provide rich insights into understanding learner agency among EAL learners for this study.

Methodology

This study employed a multiple case study approach (Duff, 2014; Yin, 2018). Aligned with a holistic theoretical framework, this case study was designed to allow for an in-depth investigation of the individualized perceptions and experiences of participants in the context of real-world situations. In this study, the selection of multiple cases, rather than a single case, aimed to provide “several instances of the phenomenon in question,” which has become “the new norm” in contemporary case study research in Applied Linguistics (Duff & Anderson, 2015, p. 114). The overall aim of this study was to examine the evolving perceptions and performances of six Chinese EAL writers, especially in terms of how they navigated their writing trajectories by exerting their agency and multilingual resources.

Context and Participants

The study was conducted in a medium-sized English-medium university in western Canada. In the academic year of 2017–2018, approximately 2,392 of the university’s 18,400 undergraduates were international students. Among them, Chinese EAL students ranked as the largest group with around 1,400 students enrolled (citation redacted for anonymity). The study focused on a course titled COMP 100 (pseudonym, as with other courses named in this study) because it was a popular required course that nearly all undergraduates take in their first year. The course aimed to teach the practical skills needed for successful academic writing across a variety of subject areas. The basic course assignments of COMP 100 included four elements: a summary, a genre or rhetorical analysis, a research paper, and a final exit exam.

My recruitment of student participants began in the Fall of 2019. Informed by Creswell and Poth’s (2018) instructions for recruiting participants for a qualitative study, I employed purposive sampling for the current study. Ideal participants for the study were Chinese EAL students enrolled in COMP 100. These Chinese EAL learners were enrolled from across various disciplines in their first year of study in the university. Six participants (one in her third year of study and excluded from this report) were finally recruited through an international students’

club and the social media application WeChat (a popular application among Chinese students). The following table presents a brief summary of the personal, linguistic, and educational backgrounds of each student.

Table 1

List of Student Participants' Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major	Prior Education	English Test (name and score)
Young	Male	21	Economics	College in China	IELTS 6 UAP 82
Zoey	Female	21	Finance	College in China	IELTS 7
MoMo	Female	18	Business	International high school	Provincial Test (pass) IELTS 6.5
Emily	Female	18	Business	International high school	TOEFL 100
Steve	Male	18	Health Information Science	International high school	ACT 30 TOEFL 100
Serena	Female	21	Math	Chinese high school	IELTS 6 UAP 80

Data Collection and Analysis

In this qualitative case study, multiple data collection methods were employed to produce rich descriptions and analyses of participants' writing-related perceptions, practices, and changes with regard to their academic writing in a first-year composition context. Data collection instruments included mainly background surveys and semi-structured interviews. Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants (see Appendix). Held in a study room at the campus library, each interview lasted from forty-five minutes to one hour and was audio-recorded with permission from participants. The interview and survey data for this study were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Yin, 2018). After reading through the whole data set several times and developing some initial ideas, I conducted the formal initial coding through the use of a web-based program for qualitative data analysis. As I began to understand the data sets on a deeper level, some codes were collated, deleted, or re-grouped into different code clusters representing new logical relations. The use of a web-based program was a convenient way to code data extracts and make changes in the coding process. During the phase of further categorizing different codes and code groups, I identified potential overarching themes that accounted for participants' holistic experiences. The major themes addressed in this paper were related to students' enactment of their learner agency and resourcefulness.

Findings: Enactment of Learner Agency and Resourcefulness

During the four-month semester in 2019, participants experienced challenges as well as improvements in their academic writing practices and socialization experiences by interacting and engaging with learning affordances within and beyond their first-year composition classes. The following discussion highlights the key role of learner agency that students displayed in drawing on academic supports beyond classrooms, especially how students' enactment of agency impacted their self-directed socialization processes. Four salient themes emerged from the data

analysis regarding the manifestation of learner agency and resourcefulness in L2 academic socialization processes: adaptive alignment of awareness and actions in accessing learning affordances; dynamic integration of past and present experiences; proactive building-up of support networks; and autonomous decision-making in navigating uncertainties. I highlight the role of learner agency among EAL students in accessing multiple learning affordances through dynamic interactions and engagements with the environment across time and space.

Adaptive Alignment of Awareness and Actions in Accessing Learning Affordances

In this study, most participants felt overwhelmed and challenged by the prospect of succeeding in their writing studies when entering into their first-year composition courses. As most participants proclaimed, “Everything was so new” to them. However, when confronted with the demanding expectations of English proficiency, complex assigned readings, and various types of writing assignments, most participants not only became aware of such challenges early on but also proactively sought supports from their surrounding environment. For example, when asked whether she had experienced challenges since her arrival, Zoey responded: “Yes, I almost met new things every day. But I basically handle them well since I take them as opportunities to learn from” (First interview, Oct 8, 2019). As shown, Zoey recognized certain challenges upon entering mainstream studies and actively aligned her actions with what she perceived as the learning opportunities identified. According to an ecological perspective, once learners recognize that learning opportunities vary for different learners, they can begin to act on available resources (van Lier, 2004). In the case of Zoey, her decision to seek resources by translating an assigned article from English to Mandarin Chinese aligned with her early awareness of her difficulties in comprehending complex academic readings. Despite spending a great amount of time on the task of reading, Zoey reported that she could understand articles at a deeper level by means of translation. Furthermore, she also learned how to write by imitating the structure and rhetorical features of her assigned readings. Similarly, another participant named Young originally sought help from his instructor and later adjusted his strategy when he recognized that his instructor was not available to provide the support he expected in his class:

I used to visit my instructor’s office time, twice a week. But later I decide not to go there to avoid misunderstanding. The writing centre is very helpful for my study. I asked questions from the tutors relating to my assignments and course content. I also visited the library yesterday and asked for help from the teacher at the research help desk (Young, First interview, September 10, 2019)

Young’s expression of “misunderstanding” reflected his perception that communications with his instructor were not as smooth as he expected. As Young recalled, his instructor seemed a bit “unfriendly” and repeatedly recommended that he withdraw from the course whenever he asked questions during his instructor’s office hours. As will be discussed, Young decided to seek help outside the classroom to avoid feeling frustrated by his instructors’ responses. By visiting the writing centre to meet with tutors on a regular basis, Young gradually improved his writing practices and gained confidence by positioning himself as an EAL learner in need of academic support.

Within any ecological system, an individual must be willing to discern learning affordances and act upon them. The resources that Young mentioned were available to every student; however, Young was the only participant in this study to visit the writing centre consistently and persistently. In fact, Young grasped simple but important skills for newcomers: asking for help when he encountered struggles rather than withdrawing from challenges. He articulated his concerns by interacting with various supporting agents without feeling intimidated by his instructors' discouragement. As shown, the cases of Zoey and Young showed the alignment of their perceptions and actions when dynamically interacting with the affordances in their learning contexts.

Dynamic Integration of Past and Present Experiences

Another salient theme that emerged from this study is related to participants' integration of their prior learning experiences and current composition studies. In this study, most participants realized that their previous experiences in academic reading and writing were limited, which prevented them from effectively managing their current composition studies. However, recognition of the differences or inconsistencies between two academic systems progressively changed over time. As EAL students became familiar with current course expectations and gained practice composing course assignments, participants tended to modify their perceptions toward their prior writing experiences and future goals. For example, Emily initially believed that she knew how to write academically since her required written essays were similar to what she practised for her Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam. By the end of the semester, however, she changed her stance when asked about the relevance of TOEFL preparation to her current composition practices:

Jing: Do you think your previous writing experiences, such as TOEFL or other exam-based preparation was sufficient enough to support your writing in your composition course?

Emily: Not that much. They are quite different. The TOEFL exam preparation might help me a bit with the summary writing, but the citation rules and writing research papers were totally new to me. I am still learning how to make a strong argument by including a claim, ground, and warrant. It is also hard for me to include my own ideas in an organized way. (Second Interview, December 17, 2019)

As shown, Emily appeared to progressively develop her understanding of the similarities and differences between what she previously practised and her current writing. When she recognized that her previous writing experiences preparing for the TOEFL examination were not enough to support her learning in her current composition course, Emily took agentive action to learn how to compose a strong argument and recognized that she needed to take further action to improve her writing practices. Similarly, Young reported that he benefited from a pathway program he took before enrolling in his composition studies and indicated that, "without that one-month experience, I will feel more challenged now." What Young noted is aligned with scholarship in the field of EAP or L2 writing, which reports that pathway or sheltered programs are helpful for EAL writers transitioning into mainstream Canadian studies (Fox, et al., 2014; Haggerty, 2019; Keefe & Shi, 2017). For instance, Haggerty (2019) found that a pathway program, which was a newly designed post-secondary academic language program, benefited

EAL learners transferring into their mainstream studies in a British Columbian university. However, given the constraints of institutional policies and lack of funding, creating new programs may be unrealistic for some Canadian universities.

In addition to integrating past and present learning experiences into aligned efforts, some participants also cherished long-term or future goals rather than obtaining a passing grade in the course. For example, when asked about his course goals, Steven responded that, in addition to successfully completing the course, he hoped to know the difference between himself and other academic writers in order to bridge such differences. When revisiting his goals in a second interview, Steve held onto this optimistic belief despite the unexpected challenges that he encountered:

I think my goal to write academically has been somehow achieved, but not quite obvious. I am unsatisfied since the course instructor provided me quite limited feedback, but the course is effective, and I have achieved my goal by self-learning (Second interview, December 28, 2019)

As shown, Steve was aware of the importance of academic writing for his learning journey and set a clear goal to improve his writing practices in the long run. Although he self-perceived that his goal was “somehow” achieved, he seemed to enjoy the “self-learning” process and was proud of the progress he made. In addition, Steve identified “limited feedback” from his instructor as an external factor that contributed to his dissatisfaction. From a second language socialization perspective, EAL students can be positioned as marginalized learners when they obtain insufficient feedback on their written work, which may impede their academic socialization process. Although influential, the effect of obtaining limited feedback on Steve’s learning seemed less detrimental since he held a long-term goal and took an agentic role in the process of self-directed socialization.

Furthermore, Steve and other participants developed their reflexivity in the process of exerting their agency. During the second round of interviews, participants presented a deepened understanding of academic writing and reflected on how their writing could be further improved if they gained greater familiarity with the academic conventions expected in their composition classes. For example, Zoey reported her realization about the importance of “critical thinking” in reading and writing essays by reflecting on her learning “to integrate others’ perspectives appropriately” into her essay writing rather than arguing her own ideas. Likewise, when he received a low grade for his summary writing, Steve took responsibility and reflected on how he “should ask for clarification before writing” (Second interview, December 28, 2019). As such, Steve displayed developed self-reflection skills while gaining more knowledge in his writing practices.

Proactive Building-up of Support Networks

In this study, participants proactively built up their individual networks of academic writing practices by interacting and engaging with various agents, communities, and resources. Beyond interactions with composition instructors, other resources included one-on-one tutoring at the writing centre, soliciting peer support (both L1 and L2), attending workshops, and employing

online tools. By placing learners at the centre of the socialization process, Zappa-Hollman and Duff (2015) have proposed using the construct of Individual Network of Practice (INoP) to examine the types and roles of various agents and resources. Aligned with their guidance, I present how participants socialized their academic practices in the context of first-year composition studies in what follows.

First, every participant reported that they had visited the writing centre, but differed in terms of times and consistency. Writing centres are a common form of academic support in North American universities and the main source of help for EAL learners (Okuda & Anderson, 2018). From an academic socialization perspective, tutors at the writing centre serve as agents to socialize EAL writers into expected writing conventions and norms. However, whether or to what extent students' academic writing improves varies for individual learners. In this study, the students who visited the writing centre persistently and regularly tended to express their appreciation for the support they received, as well as benefited from acquired writing skills and knowledge. For example, Young described in detail how a tutor at the writing centre guided him through hands-on assistance on one of his writing assignments:

I remembered the first time when I asked about how to write a reflective letter, she wrote everything on a piece of paper in detail, explaining what it is by relating to what I've learned before, such as, what are my ideas and how to use it to respond to the summary I made by reading the article...That is really helpful. (First interview, September 10, 2019)

Apparently, interactive one-on-one tutoring was very effective in accommodating Young's concerns and writing needs. Studies have found that EAL writers prefer one-on-one interactions with instructors, especially to gain direct feedback through conferencing about their writing (e.g., Best et. al., 2015; Hu, 2019). Compared to his communication with his instructor, Young reported he felt more comfortable and confident when interacting with tutors at the writing centre, who were encouraging and less judgemental. Additionally, by joining a six-week Learning Plan (an individualized learning program set for EAL writers) recommended by his instructor, Young gained extra one-on-one support for his writing practices. Altogether, Young noted that he spent almost five to ten hours meeting with tutors per week throughout the semester. His devotion of time and energy into interacting with writing tutors, an enactment of agency, facilitated his academic writing improvement and socialization process.

In addition to seeking academic support from tutors at the writing centre, learner agency among participants was also reflected in their efforts to informally establish individual networks. For instance, for the purpose of obtaining different perspectives on his written drafts, Steve exerted his agency by asking for advice from an academic advisor in his discipline as well as his native English speaking (NES) roommates, and by attending workshops related to academic writing:

One is organized by the library; another one may be organized by the Residence. I am not sure since they said if you want to improve your writing, just come to the Fair. So, I did. The library one is huge like a peer-reviewed workshop. Students are invited to read each other's papers and provide feedback. Because there is limited time for a student to read each other's papers, I think the effect is limited. (Second interview, December 19, 2019)

The Fair that Steve described seemed to be a group peer-review activity, in which students were organized to review others' written work, provide feedback within a limited period of time, and then exchange papers with another student. In doing so, students could obtain quick feedback from multiple perspectives and contribute their ideas to each other's work in a reciprocal way. Although the effect of engaging in this activity was "limited," Steve made a crucial step to immerse himself in his local environment, which is important for international students. Moreover, the positive comments that he received from NES students facilitated his awareness and socialization of key aspects of academic writing conventions and practices. Promisingly, Steve noted that he learned how to conduct self-directed studies, an unexpected benefit, by interacting and engaging with various agents and resources. From a language socialization perspective, both EAL learners and their peers can be powerful agents of socialization, especially when the main facilitators (such as instructors) are absent (Duff, 2010; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015). Indeed, Steve validates how building up individual networks through the enactment of agency can facilitate improved academic writing practices and self-directed socialization experiences.

Another manifestation of learner agency was EAL learners' effective use of online tools and resources. For example, an important strategy MoMo employed was searching for information online and making use of various digital tools in her process of "learning to write." MoMo reported that she learned the APA citation style mainly from the university website and other online resources. Additionally, she chose a research topic related to social media and took interest in her research process. Although she reported that finding academic sources was challenging because of her chosen topic, MoMo took an agentive role in making full use of her digital literacy to gain knowledge by surfing websites in both English and Mandarin Chinese. Equipped with previous experience using online tools, EAL writers in this study seemed to naturally integrate such tools into their learning process. For instance, Zoey reported that she found using Zotero helpful to automatically generate citation lists, but she also manually checked the lists again before submitting her research paper. Furthermore, when she felt confused or uncertain about particular rules, she asked the research help desk or writing centre for assistance. Additionally, by employing web-based Google docs, she was also involved in collaborative writing with one of her classmates, which enriched her writing experiences. Therefore, exerting learner agency by using digital tools and online resources provided EAL learners with complementary opportunities for learning, which facilitated their academic socialization.

Autonomous Decision-making in Navigating Uncertainties

Students' academic socialization processes are not only mediated by various external agents and resources, such as instructors or tutors at the writing centre, as well as textbooks and online resources, but can also be internally mediated or self-directed (Anderson, 2017). Having agency and having choices are closely connected (Larsen-Freeman, 2019). In the process of self-directed socialization, learner agency in this study was also manifested when participants made informed decisions and modified their own coping strategies to navigate their writing trajectories. The effect of exerting their agency can either facilitate or impede their academic socialization (Duff, 2010). A typical example was Young, who resisted his instructors' repeated advice to withdraw from his composition class by staying in his section, as mentioned earlier. According to Young's description, since he was the only EAL student in his class, his instructor treated him the same as

students from NES backgrounds. During the process of interacting with his instructor, Young felt an increasing amount of stress:

I cannot fully understand what the teacher said in class time, first of all. Since she might tell a joke that only native speakers can understand. I felt lost and sad about it since I cannot figure out what is happening. Every time I go to her office hours, she might suggest that I register for COMP 99 and just stop to answer my questions anymore (Young, First interview, September 10, 2019).

As shown, Young interpreted his instructor's suggestion as a signal of unwelcomeness, and he became too intimidated to communicate with the instructor during her office hours since he was unsure of how to deal with the stressful situation and tried to avoid potential misunderstandings. His instructor's suggestion that he withdraw from his course socialized him into a category of inferior EAL learners marginalized from others in his class. Young reflected that he felt "so bad about himself." Despite his rocky interactions with his instructor, Young excised his agency by deciding to stay in the class and seek support outside his classroom, as discussed above. In addition to being socialized into positioning himself as inferior to his NES peers, Young also socialized his instructor into believing that he would exert his utmost efforts into his composition studies to stay in the class. As Young later reported, his instructor provided him with an opportunity to enrol in a six-week learning plan specifically designed for EAL writers in need of writing assistance. This time, Young exerted his agency by accepting his instructor's offer and made a commitment to go through with his writing practices. Both Young's act of resistance and acceptance of his instructor's advice demonstrated his enactment of agency: making his own decision with the options and resources provided.

In addition to making their own decisions, another important aspect of the participants' self-directed socialization was strategically coping with uncertainties about and struggles in their academic writing practices. For instance, Emily developed her own way to incorporate various resources when completing her writing assignments at different stages of her composition studies. When asked about her development in academic writing, Emily cheerfully shared a set of procedures she developed for composing and revising her written drafts:

At first, I will follow the guideline and samples that the instructor provided very carefully and write the first draft, then I will send my draft to the instructor for suggestions. After I get the feedback, I will make changes accordingly and revise the draft. Then I will bring them to the Writing Centre to meet the tutors there. We work together on my paper, which is also quite helpful. Sometimes I could even have a whole paragraph changed. Then I might feel ready to produce the final version and hand it in. (First interview, September 28, 2019)

It seemed that Emily not only worked hard but also learned how to wisely and strategically make use of the supports available to her. In addition to benefiting greatly from interactions with her instructor and the help gained from the writing centre, Emily indicated the positive role of feedback from peer-editing practices, of exchanges with her Chinese friends on her research ideas, and using Grammarly to check her grammar and diction. Her agency demonstrated a self-directed process of interacting with texts as well as various agents in her

academic discourse and community. Emily also enhanced her confidence by interacting and engaging with learning affordances in her language socialization process.

Discussion

Informed by an ecological perspective and language socialization theory, these findings exemplified how the students in this study attempted to seek learning opportunities and engage with various agents and sources in order to navigate their writing journeys and improve their academic performance. In alignment with previous research on second language academic socialization, the findings showed that the learner agency of EAL writers greatly affects their writing trajectories, especially their self-directed learning processes (Anderson, 2017; Duff & Doherty, 2015). Being active agents, most participants leveraged external and internal resources strategically to create favourable learning opportunities and outcomes in their writing trajectories. Therefore, the interrelatedness between “active learners” and their surrounding environment revealed the uniqueness and diversity of learners’ agency in interacting with mediated affordances for academic writing development.

The findings of student participants’ efforts to seek various affordances to improve their academic writing were aligned with empirical studies on multilingual students. For instance, Morton et al. (2015) found that multicultural learners who solicited feedback from numerous people have a “multiplicity of resources” at their disposal. As Zappa-Hollman and Duff (2015) emphasized in their study, “what is remarkable was just how resourceful the participants were in drawing on a wide range of human and other forms of support” (p. 357). Similarly, participants in this study worked out their own ways to understand their environment and seek resources for academic success. These findings show that students’ enactment of agency was impacted by a range of contextual and individual factors when they engaged and interacted with different resources. Future studies should therefore focus on how EAL students’ employment of resources is dynamically impacted by various factors in different contexts.

Despite their efforts, the actual resources that participants chose to employ, the amount of help they obtained, and the extent to which they drew upon various affordances varied greatly from participant to participant in this situated context. As discussed above, some participants were more agentive and resourceful than others in the ways they sought supports from their surrounding environment. These findings also showed that students who were more aware of their challenges early on and actively familiarized themselves with surrounding supports were better equipped to achieve their course goals. That said, the outcome of academic socialization is complicated and unpredictable, and cannot be guaranteed by the enactment of learner agency. Instances of students’ exerting learner agency highlight the function of socialization in building support networks for academic writing practices and being autonomous in their decision-making, which is conducive to students’ self-directed socialization processes and academic performance.

Pedagogical Recommendations

From an ecological perspective on language learning and academic socialization, I discuss how the findings of this study can inform pedagogical considerations for creating agency rich environments to support EAL learners in first year composition courses. As Biesta and Tedder

(2007) pointed out, agency is not a personal trait nor an independent power but can be “achieved by means of an environment, not simply in the environment” (p. 137). To facilitate the achievement of EAL learners’ agency in their composition studies, instructors are important agents who have power over the learning activities, resources, and opportunities that students access (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). It is also important to acknowledge that the achievement of learner agency depends on the efforts and openness of both students and instructors (Larsen-Freeman, 2019). As such, several pedagogical implications can be drawn from this study.

First of all, this study suggests composition instructors and EAL educators become more aware of the complexities of academic writing for EAL learners and appreciate students’ resourcefulness in developing their academic literacy. It is also helpful for instructors to learn that EAL students’ struggles with English proficiencies do not mean that they are non-agentive or only a product of socialization. From a contemporary language socialization perspective, Duff and Doherty’s (2015) study indicated that agency is a crucial component in students’ self-directed process of socialization since “highly motivated learners plan and exert their agency in various ways to achieve their goals” (p. 55). Thus, composition instructors could holistically understand EAL students’ learning paths and support them by recognizing EAL learners’ multiplicity of resources for practising academic writing, while acknowledging their challenges in developing English capacities in taking writing courses.

Additionally, composition instructors can prompt EAL learners’ agency by optimizing the learning environment and guiding students to be adaptive to changing situations (Knoblock & Gorman, 2018; Larsen-Freeman, 2019; Shapiro et al., 2016). For instance, Shapiro et al. (2016) proposed a framework of “teaching for agency” (p. 31) and exemplified how to promote the agency of multilingual writers in classroom practices. Some pedagogical innovations, such as integrating agency as a central construct in designing writing assignments, may serve as a model for promoting EAL writers’ agency by optimizing resources in situated contexts for EAL students. Since writing centres play a central role in supporting EAL writing needs (Simpson & Waye, 2016), composition instructors could invite a writing tutor as an embedded guest in daily classroom activities. All the students, especially EAL learners, would benefit from such teaching practices.

Furthermore, this study suggests composition instructors trust EAL students’ choices and create spaces for the latter to exercise their decision-making capacities with respect. As Larsen-Freeman (2019) indicated, “at least create a place where students are not silenced because they cannot draw on all their language resources in the classroom” (p. 72). One practical way to achieve this trust and space can be initiating new projects, such as “writing about films,” chosen to encourage EAL writers to make choices and optimize their resources (Shapiro et al., 2016). The authors also indicated that allowing students to “thrive and stumble” with trust in these created spaces can lead to “learning and resilience” as a reward (p. 49). A specific example in this study was when participants who performed well in their genre analysis assignments were given the option to choose a genre type they were familiar with, such as a Chinese advertisement or fairy tale. As such, EAL learners felt empowered to exercise their agency by utilizing multiple resources.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There were several limitations to this study. First, the sampling of this case study was small and student groups were limited to Chinese EAL writers in a Canadian first-year composition course context. Future research could include EAL learners with diverse linguistic and cultural groups, which would further enrich research findings in this field. In particular, considering the local context of this study, it was also necessary to include the needs of domestic students who were also EAL learners because of their families' immigration status. Compared to international EAL learners, the academic writing needs of domestic EAL students were less visible and tended to be overlooked by instructors and academic support services.

In addition to the sampling of EAL learners, the design of research methods can also be modified within specific institutional contexts. Preferably, if future studies could include an ongoing needs analysis of EAL learners with a larger sample size, the findings could identify and categorize students' specific needs with updated information to complement qualitative case studies. Institutional policies and programs would also benefit from such investigations. Moreover, it would be interesting to compare and contrast EAL learners and NES students in terms of their attitudes, needs, and expectations in taking first-year composition courses (e.g., Stuart, 2012). The results would provide insights for pedagogical approaches to teaching composition with an inclusive and culturally responsive curriculum.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the participants for agreeing to take part in this study. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editor of the *BC TEAL Journal* for taking time to read the earlier version of this article and giving their feedback.

References

- Anderson, T. (2017). The doctoral gaze: Foreign PhD students' internal and external academic discourse socialization. *Linguistics and Education*, 37, 1–10. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2016.12.001>
- Best, K., Jones-Katz, L., Stolzenburg, B., & Williamson, D. (2015). Listening to our students: An exploratory practice study of ESL writing students' views of feedback. *TESOL Journal*, 6(2), 332–357. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.152>
- Biesta, G., & Tedder, M. (2007). Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39(2), 132–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2007.11661545>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE). (2016). *Facts and figures: Canada's performance in international education, 2017*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbie.ca/about-ie/facts-and-figures/>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches (4th Ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

- Douglas Fir Group. (2016). A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world. *The Modern Language Journal*, 100(S1), 19–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12301>
- Duff, P. (2010). Language socialization into academic discourse communities. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 30, 169–192. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0267190510000048>
- Duff, P. (2014). Case study research on language learning and use. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 34, 233–255. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190514000051>
- Duff, P. (2019). Social dimensions and processes in second language acquisition: Multilingual socialization in transnational contexts. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103, 6–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12534>
- Duff, P., & Anderson, T. (2015). Case study research. In J. D. Brown & C. Coombe (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to research in language teaching and learning* (pp. 112–118). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Duff, P., & Doherty, L. (2015). Examining agency in (second) language socialization research. In P. Deters, X. Gao, E. Miller, & G. Vitanova (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary approaches to theorizing and analyzing agency and second language learning* (pp. 54–72). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Duff, P., & Talmy, S. (2011). Language socialization approaches to second language acquisition. In D. Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative approaches to second language acquisition* (pp. 95–116). London, UK: Routledge.
- Dufva, H. (2013). Language learning as dialogue and participation. In E. Christensen, L. Kuure, A. Mörch, & B. Lindström (Eds.), *Problem-based learning for the 21st century. New Practices and Learning Environments* (pp. 51–72). Aalborg, DK: Aalborg University Press.
- Fox, J., Cheng, L., & Zumbo, B. D. (2014). Do they make a difference? The impact of English language programs on second language students in Canadian universities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 48(1), 57–85. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.103>
- Haggerty, J. (2019). *Multilingual undergraduate writers' discourse socialization in a sheltered academic English program*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2429/72303>
- Heng, T. T. (2018). Different is not deficient: Contradicting stereotypes of Chinese international students in US higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(1), 22–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1152466>
- Hu, J. (2019). Simultaneous oral-written feedback approach (SOWFA): Students' preference on writing response. *Response to Writing Journal*, 5(2), 5–45. Retrieved from <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw/vol5/iss2/2>
- Hyland, K. (2013). Writing in the university: Education, knowledge and reputation. *Language Teaching*, 46(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000036>
- Jabeen, R., Wang, P., & Cheng, L. (2019). Academic engagement, social integration, and academic socialization: English as an additional language in higher education. *BC TEAL Journal*, 4(1), 95–107. <https://doi.org/10.14288/bctj.v4i1.337>
- Keefe, K., & Shi, L. (2017). An EAP program and students' success at a Canadian university. *TESL Canada Journal*, 34(2), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v34i2.1264>
- Knoblock, N., & Gorman, S. (2018). L2 writer in a first-year writing class: Activating the support network. *Writing & Pedagogy*, 10(1–2), 275–296. <https://doi.org/10.1558/wap.27720>

- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2019). On language learner agency: A complex dynamic systems theory perspective. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103(51), 61–79. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12536>
- Liu, T. (2016). *Learning experience of Chinese international students in Master of Education program at a mid-sized Ontario university* (Master's thesis, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario). Retrieved from <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/5841/>
- Morton, J., Storch, N., & Thompson, C. (2015). What our students tell us: Perceptions of three multilingual students on their academic writing in first year. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 30(4), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2015.06.007>
- Okuda, T., & Anderson, T. (2018). Second language graduate students' experiences at the writing center: A language socialization perspective. *TESOL Quarterly*, 52(2), 391–413. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.406>
- Preston, J. P., & Wang, A. (2017). The academic and personal experiences of mainland Chinese students enrolled in a Canadian Master of Education program. *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development*, 19(3), 177–192. <https://doi.org/10.1108/tjced-05-2017-0006>
- Shapiro, S., Cox, M., Shuck, G., & Simnitt, E. (2016). Teaching for agency: From appreciating linguistic diversity to empowering student writers. *Composition Studies*, 44(1), 31–52.
- Simpson, A. M., & Wayne, L. (2016). “You Actually Learn Something”: Gathering Student Feedback Through Focus Group Research to Enhance Needs-Based Programming. *BC TEAL Journal*, 1(1), 38–50. <https://doi.org/10.14288/bctj.v1i1.230>
- Steffensen, S. V., & Kramsch, C. (2017). The ecology of second language acquisition and socialization. *Encyclopedia of language and education*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02327-4_2-1
- van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning: A sociocultural perspective*. Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic.
- van Lier, L. (2008). *Ecological-semiotic perspectives on educational linguistics* (pp. 596–605). *The Handbook of Educational Linguistics*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. <http://doi:10.1002/9780470694138.ch42>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (Sixth ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Zappa-Hollman, S., & Duff, P. A. (2015). Academic English socialization through individual networks of practice. *TESOL Quarterly*, 49(2), 333–368. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.188>
- Zhang, Z. (2011). A nested model of academic writing approaches: Chinese international graduate students' views of English academic writing. *Language and Literacy*, 13(1), 39–59. <https://doi.org/10.20360/g27g6r>
- Zhang, Z., & Zhou, G. (2010). Understanding Chinese international students at a Canadian university: Perspectives, expectations, and experiences. *Comparative and International Education/Education*, 39(3), 43–58. <https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v39i3.9162>

Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

A. First Interview

1. In general terms, how has your time in this university gone so far?
2. Have you experienced any academic challenges or barriers in your studies?

3. How often do you write in English in your daily life?
4. What do you think are the main differences between daily writing and academic writing?
5. Have you ever been taught how to write papers in your first language? If so, when and how?
6. Have you ever been taught how to write papers in English? If so, when and how?
7. What writing skills and knowledge have you learned so far from the course?
8. How does the reading of academic articles help you in academic writing?
9. What challenges have you experienced so far in your writing assignments (both in-class and out-of-class)?
10. Could you understand the writing expectations (such as class assignments or writing guidance) in the course clearly?
11. Do you feel satisfied with your academic writing so far? What are the parts of your writing that you feel good about or bad about?
12. Do you feel your language proficiency (will) affect your performance in the academic writing?
13. How do you feel being a Chinese EAL student in the class? What challenges do you think you've encountered or experienced being a first-year international student?
14. Have you consulted anyone (e.g., friends, the writing centre) while writing and revising your assignments? How often do you do it?
15. What are your goals in the course for academic writing?

B. Second Interview

1. Since our first interview, what sorts of changes, if any, have occurred regarding your academic writing here at the university?
2. What kind of writing skills or competence have you gained or developed from the course?
3. Do you feel your academic writing has improved, regressed, or stayed the same?
4. Which assignment for academic writing do you feel most challenging so far? Why?
5. Have you found the written feedback from the instructors to be helpful? How?
6. In what ways does the writing course support you in your subject learning?
7. Do you feel you have received enough support with your writing? Why or why not?
8. What writing-related support have you sought to obtain so far? (e.g., one-on-one writing tutoring, writing workshop)? How does it help or facilitate your studies?
9. For what writing skills or writing-related knowledge do you feel you need further support?
10. Based on the support and guidance you have received thus far in your program, what do you feel will be your biggest challenges for academic writing in the future? Do you feel prepared to advance to your next academic stage? What role does writing have in this process?



The *BC TEAL Journal* is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Copyright rests with the author(s).