Exploring Taiwanese EFL Graduate Students' Learning Academic Writing

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Abstract. Much has been done to explore the successful tips for scholarly publication in higher education, and has revealed the challenges facing periphery scholars; few studies, however, discussed the enculturation of learning how to write their theses in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts from graduate students' standpoints. This study aims to bridge the gaps in the extant literature on academic writing and yield insights into how graduate students create research space from the perspective of community of practice (CoP). In particular, this paper addressed what graduate students might encounter in terms of graduate students' beliefs and attitudes toward academic writing and their multidimensional engagement in the academic community. Four graduate students were involved in the study via homogeneous sampling from four universities in Taiwan. To obtain rich data, semi-structured interviews were adopted, audio-recorded, transcribed, and re-constructed. The results highlighted graduate students' need for systematic research paper writing training. The participants believe they may benefit more from thorough academic training, but they found their academic writing training and writing proficiency insufficient. This study concludes with pedagogical implications for rigorous course design and training for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing professionals to improve the quality of EFL academic writing.
Keywords: community of practice, academic writing, English as a foreign language (EFL), English for academic purposes (EAP)

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, studies on academic writing have proliferated. Riazi (1997), for instance, reviewed 20 empirical studies concerning writing and academic disciplines from 1984 to 1994. Since then, there has been an increasing interest in the topic among researchers in academic literacy (Leki, 2017). Recently, increasing attention has been paid to writing at the graduate-school level, including native-English-speaking students (NES) and non-native-English speaking students (Aitken, Smith, Fawns & Jones, 2020; Huang, 2010; Li, 2007).

However, notwithstanding the ample amount of research, underexplored areas remain. First, most studies were concerned with the successful tips for scholarly publication (Flowerdew, 2001; Tsai, 2008); the quality of journal criteria (Egbert, 2007; Ivankova, 2014); the guidelines for research papers (Lazaraton, 2003; Tracy, 2010; van Lier, 2010); and the challenges facing periphery scholars in legitimate peripheral participation in the

humanities and social sciences (Canagarajah, 1996; Casanave & Vandrick, 2003; Flowerdew, 1999a, 1999b; Paltridge & Starfield, 2008; Swales & Feak, 2015); however, few researchers discussed the process of graduate students learning how to write their theses or dissertations in EFL contexts from insiders' perspectives (Leki, 2017; Paltridge & Starfield, 2008); that is, their voices and identity as well as lived experiences should be taken into consideration to fill a missing piece in the studies. Second, whether working with NES or NNES students, these studies were almost conducted in Anglophone universities; there is still a scarcity of parallel research with NNES students in non-Anglophone settings, such as Asian universities (e.g. Li, 2007). Third, the studies tended to be situated in the context of disciplinary practices aiming for scholarly publication, failing to examine the fact that novice researchers may experience strenuous academic enculturation into the academic community (Casanave & Li, 2008; Duff, 2010; Leki, 2017), which has crucial implications for strengthening the commitment of TESOL professionals to the teaching of advanced academic literacy by enhancing knowledge of these young scholars' writing (Li, 2007).

Therefore, the purpose of the study aims to bridge the divides in the extant literature on academic writing in the graduate school level and wishes to yield an illuminating insight into how Taiwanese TESOL graduate students create research space. In particular, this paper emphasizes the academic enculturation of these four graduate students conducting research projects in TESOL program.

In the following section, the theoretical framework, community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999), will be elaborated first. Later, this study will examine *novice* researchers' enculturation into the professional community of scholarly writing. Finally, EFL learners' writing abilities and their relationship with their advisors will be discussed and explained, followed by the rationale of the study as well as two research questions.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), community of Practice (CoP) is defined as a number of relations among people, action, and the world, in due course and relation with other peripheral and overlapping communities of practice. For instance, the community of practice of language learners may encompass experienced ESL writing experts, novice writers, native speakers of English writers and writing instruction programs as well as the beliefs, values and perspectives that each member brings to the community; the interactions among the members; and available resources. The interrelationships among these components and the interactions between the members establish the community of practice toward becoming writing professionals in the target language, though somewhat legitimate but very peripheral participation (Canagarajah, 2003).

Legitimate peripheral participation refers to the process in which learners become "full participants in the community of practitioners" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.35). For example, a novice researcher immigrating to an Anglophone university started to learn the academic conventions of writing with the adaptive supervision of their supervisors so that

the inexperienced writers were able to grasp certain knowledge and skills to participate in the community of practice, as evidenced in Harwood and Petrić's (2020) study. For EFL novice writers, learning to get into the professional community of academic writing is somewhat legitimate but peripheral (Canagarajah, 2003). In one case study (Felder, 2010), doctoral students, when experiencing constant struggles with their research reports, adopted different strategies and attitudes toward their engagement with the accepted academic conventions in the local community; their advisors adopted different strategies and attitudes in return for their advisees. Felder (2010), however, ignored crucial aspects such as participants' multiple engagement with academic resources and global community of practice (e.g. textual borrowing and international community discussion), both of which were also regarded as an important means to participate in the research community (Flowerdew, 2000; Li, 2007). In addition, whether graduate students' needs for academic literary practices are met is not clearly understood (Li, 2007).

It has been indicated that there may not be enough TESOL programs offering coherent design in academic writing courses that can prepare graduate students for academic purposes (Li, 2007). Much research has focused on the strategies on publication for novice researchers to gain somewhat legitimate but very peripheral participation (Canagarajah, 2003; Flowerdew, 2000); less attention, however, was devoted to understanding the aspects of young EFL scholars' multidimensional community of practice in TESOL to improve L2 academic writing in graduate school level.

Therefore, it is proposed that well-designed, systematic program training be offered to foster young scholars' research and writing skills and that an illuminating understanding of the legitimate participation of graduate students in Taiwan may be better enhanced via a qualitative in-depth interview. It seems crucial to explore this under-researched area in the study to help novice researchers gain mastery over academic writing.

The following two research questions guided the direction of the current study: (a) What were EFL students' motivations and attitudes toward graduate school literacy practices in Taiwan? (b) How did EFL students participate in the community of practice in L2 writing?

2. METHOD

a. Participants & sampling

Initially, the study attempted to find ten participants in TESOL programs in Taiwan. Homogeneous sampling (Patton, 2002) was employed to fit the scope of the current study. Participants were selected based on two criteria. First, the current study focused on EFL graduate students in TESOL program. Second, the participants were able to share their academic writing experiences in the field of TESOL. To establish rapport with the participants, the researcher had frequent contact with them to build trust so they could confide with the researcher candidly. Eventually enrolled in the study were four volunteer TESOL graduate students from four universities in Taiwan. The participants (three females and one male), Pei-chi, Mei-li, Da-Wei and Yu-Chuan (all pseudonyms).

According to Li (2007), whether in social sciences or natural sciences, academic writing has been neglected by college professors as teachers expect that students should know how to write a decent academic paper in English. Li (2007) called for more research attention to EAP writing professionals and "more opportunities for EAP professional development should be created in both the degree programs for pre-service TESOL trainees and for in-service practitioners" (p.74).

In Taiwan, it seems that even some master/doctoral programs do not offer research paper writing as a required course. Mei-li once mentioned that "our department does not offer research paper writing class. Our professors mentioned that some universities have [writing class], but we did not have yet."

Mei-li considered academic writing very important because, according to her professors, her writing "needs improvement." On the other hand, in some programs which offered research methods and paper writing classes, the writing teachers seemed to lack pedagogical expertise in guiding students to write research articles. Yu-Chuan complained that:

> **Yu-Chuan:** I only took research methods and paper writing classes in the first year in MA-TESOL program. Professor Liu is not good at teaching research methodologies and writing.
> **Interviewer:** Um-hum…what happened in class?
> **Yu-Chuan:** I think that she ACTUALLY does not know quantitative stuff. She only taught the content according to what the textbook says. Although she tried to lead the discussion, it was futile. We did not understand the textbook, either. It is written in English with lots of graphs and tables explaining quantitative concepts. Yeah…everybody did not understand a thing at all.

Yu-Chuan, a typical case of disadvantaged EFL graduate students (reported in Leki, 2017; Casanave & Li, 2008), appeared adamant in her belief that she did not receive solid training in the MA-TESOL program in terms of writing and research methods. She complained a lot about her writing teacher's teaching skills and content knowledge on quantitative research. However, the case of Yu-shuan may not be representative of the experiences of all graduate students. More research efforts need to be made to reveal the lived experience of graduate students in a view to "empowering" novice researchers.

b. Data collection

To obtain thick data (Patton, 2002), semi-structured interviews were adopted, tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed (Nunan, 1992) and re-constructed (Carspecken, 1996). The interview protocol was developed following Carspecken's (1996) suggestions. A portion of the interview questions was adapted from Felder's (2010) study. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour.

The interview protocols started from participants' research experience (first domain). For example, the researcher began with "I know that you are studying/already graduated xxx, could you tell me your initial research experience?" Then, the interviewer/researcher continued to ask about graduate school courses the participants have taken/are taking. "Could

you talk about the courses you have taken so far?" Once the participant mentioned courses like research methods or academic writing for writing a thesis, the interviewer proceeded to "Could you tell me what you learned from the research methods/writing class?"

The second domain is on the writing training and students' needs. Participants were encouraged to comment on any training they had received and whether the courses they took catered to their needs. For example, "You seemed to take quantitative/qualitative course from XYZ, could you tell me what you learned in the class from the beginning till the end?" Once the participants expressed their difficulties in taking the course, the researcher empowered them to express their concerns.

The last domain is on writing experience and advisor-advisee relationship. Questions are like "Tell me the last time you met your advisor. What did XYZ tell you about your research?" If the participants had a hard time articulating their relationship with each other, they were asked to describe their relationship through metaphors. "Please describe your relationship with your advisor. What roles does he/she play in your thesis writing?" Additionally, an interview guide was used to help the researcher ask relevant questions. Suppose the informants deviated from the interview questions (depending on whether the themes were deemed important to the participants). In that case, the researcher may intervene to clarify some of the misunderstandings or new interview questions may be added to follow-up interviews.

c. Data analysis

After collecting the primary data (interviews), efforts were made to re-construct the data before coding based on Carspecken's (1996) suggestions. After the initial reconstruction (power and role analysis), coding schemes were developed, and new categories were re-assembled when a new theme emerged by re-visiting the data.

To validate the interpretations of data analysis, the researcher used member check to clarify some of the misinterpretations of the quotes. Peer review was sought to examine the researcher's bias.

d. Research ethics

The four participants signed the informed consent forms so that their names, institutions, or others that may reveal their identities are kept confidential. Participants were told that the collected data, including interview transcriptions and audio recordings, could only be used for research purposes. Results of the study, with their prior permission, were reported below.

3. RESULT

After analyzing the data, salient themes emerged. The taxonomy of the multidimensional engagement with the research community of practice is illustrated in Table 1 to answer the two research questions.

a. Personal motivation and attitudes toward graduate school courses
The four participants, coming from different TESOL programs in Taiwan, held different motivations and attitudes toward graduate school courses. For Pei-chi, she held a positive

attitude toward entering graduate school "to learn more knowledge and theories of TESOL and enhance my English teaching skill." In addition, "to be honest, it's to have a better degree" said Mei-Li. In terms of graduate courses, Yu-Chuan shared her experience with the researcher that:

> Yeah, she treated us as her subjects, yet I think that Professor XYZ cannot publish papers if she did not collect data in class. That's why they use their own students. I find it okay if they inform us in advance…To be honest, if you read their published papers, you cannot find the value of their research.

It seemed to the researcher that Pei-shuan found it acceptable for professors to use their class to do research, but considered the research articles written by her professor pointless. In fact, she seemed disappointed with her quantitative course. "I cannot remember exactly what I wrote because I was forced to submit my paper. Thus I only reported correlation coefficient, but I don't know how to do it now." This can be analyzed via the traditional power structure in the teacher-student relationship. Teachers, considered to be more powerful in the class, can ask students to fulfill any requirements. Pei-Chuan seemed to imply that she had no choice but to obey the rule stipulated by the tacit agenda on the traditional role played by the teacher as an authority or arbitrator when she said, "I was forced to submit my paper." The other three participants, such as Da-wei, also had the same feeling toward their professors.

Table 1. Multidimensional Engagement in one Research Community of Practice

1. Personal motivation and attitudes toward graduate school courses
2. Interacting with the local research community
   2.1 Power struggle with thesis advisors
   2.2 Finding common research interests and "boss" to work with
   2.3 Expert assistance for the enhancement of RA papers
3. Drawing on personal experience and practice of RA writing
   3.1 Previous experience with RA writing courses
   3.2 Seeking opportunities to improve RA writing
   3.3 Preferred needs for solid EAP writing instruction
4. Interacting with the global research community

b. Interacting with the local research community

Professors played an essential role in the four participants' literacy practices in graduate school. They seemed to be the *knowledge bestowers* who provided help to the graduate students. However, getting along with thesis advisors is by no means easy for the four graduate students, which involves struggling with traditional power, interacting with their bosses and gaining expert's assistance.

b.1 Power struggle with thesis advisors

In Felder's (2010) study, she investigated the advisor-advisee relationship in tertiary education, revealing the hierarchical structure or higher social-economic status in a rather

conservative socio-cultural context. In the four participants' accounts, ample data supported the claim that their thesis advisors tended to have normative or traditional power endowed by the society. For example, Mei-li once remarked that when her classmates and she herself did not know how to answer questions:

> Professor XYZ said to us, "DID you study?" When my classmates garbled, she said, "Now, close your book and let's have a test." By doing so, she thinks she can push students to work harder, but I feel that it's counter-effective.

Mei-Li told the researcher that the professor "kept questioning students" and that she had no choice but to obey. It can be inferred that the teacher had dominant power over the students, as if she were a dictator telling her subjects to follow her instructions. As Da-Wei indicated that students "don't have the right to change it" and "When teacher decided on anything, it's hard to change." Traditional teacher-student relationship, also between advisor and advisee, in these four participants' programs seems to fit Dysthe's (2002) description of the *teaching model*, characterized as asymmetry, power difference, and reliance.

Pei-chi, on the other hand, seemed to have an egalitarian relationship with her professors and advisor. Her professor once complimented on her writing performance that she had the potential to study in Ph.D. program.

> Professor XYZ complimented on my research potential to study in the Ph.D. program, encouraging me to continue my studies. She also complimented on my "powerful' writing proficiency. She even thought that mine is better than that of some native speakers.

Pei-chi's professor seemed to demonstrate his charisma as a knowledgeable EFL teacher and acted as a facilitator and resource provider who influenced Pei-chi's views of her academic writing skills. Her professor's compliments may exert a profound influence on her and have a positive impact on her writing. Affective issues, such as confidence, and anxiety, as Paltridge and Starfield (2008) suggested, should be taken into consideration when advisors are to give lucid, intelligible, helpful and above all *actionable feedback*, which advisors and advisees can discuss and make each other understood.

b.2 Finding common research interests and "boss" to work with

Speaking of choosing advisors, Pei-chi mentioned that "I thought of my own interest first." It seems that research interests are an important impetus for her to begin research.

> I have been interested in English learning strategies...I thought my English writing ability is good, so I decided to work with Professor XYZ...He mentioned he could offer me a class to conduct research.

Having the same interest with advisors seems important, and they may provide resources to the advisee, also mentioned by Da-Wei during the interview: "He knows that I am interested in computer and listening…and he already has everything I need for the study."

"He already has everything I need" indicates that his advisor provides him help with thesis writing and the resources he may capitalize on. Advisors may also play a role in assisting students in offering them academic resources to complete their theses. However, despite common interests shared with the professor, it does not mean that working with their "bosses" (advisors) is always smooth. Pei-Chuan is a case in point. "At first, I was fond of multimedia and Professor XYZ conducted relevant research, so I worked with her. But she was not active in guiding me to do research."

Pei-Chuan indicated that her thesis advisor was not active because her boss "was too busy with administrative work." It seems difficult to engage in the local community with thesis advisors to obtain expert assistance to improve writing skills. Thus, if teachers cannot offer students the necessary help, students may not benefit from them in academics.

b.3 Expert assistance for the enhancement of RA papers

Although graduate students may encounter difficulties in interacting with their advisors, in Pei-chi's case, her professors seemed to manage rapport with their advisees, and they were willing to help them with their research articles. When Pei-chi was having difficulty writing her thesis, her professor gave her timely assistance:

> I think [my professor] helped me a lot with the contribution [of my study]. Sometimes I don't know whether my research result can be considered a contribution, but my professor can remind me of some missing pieces.

Participants may benefit more from a helping and open-minded professor, mentioned by Da-Wei, "because he is so open-minded and communicative and he knows my needs." Egalitarian advisor-advisee relationship, as suggested by, is preferred by allowing graduate students the responsibility of decision-making to become full-fledged members of a discipline (Belcher, 2008), legitimately engaging, though peripherally, in the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

c. Drawing on personal experience and practice of RA writing
c.1 Previous experience of RA writing courses

Before becoming a full-fledged member of a discipline in the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), participants' prior experience and practice of research article writing are regarded as important training as *legitimate peripheral participation* (Canagarajah, 2003). As Pei-chi recalled:

> The thesis includes learning the structure of introduction, literature review, methodology, etc. Besides learning the structure, I learned the techniques of writing literature and discussion. In class, the teacher gave us samples and then discussed some questions.

Pei-chi remembered how she learned the accepted standard of writing a research article in her writing class via classroom discussion and analyzing some writing samples. In addition, Mei-li was taught to "emulate others' article" and learn "the formulaic expressions." Emulating how experienced authors write, a way of textual borrowing (Li, 2007), was also a

form of engagement with the community of literacy practices.

c.2 *Seeking opportunities to improve RA writing*
Besides learning how to write in class, some participants developed a habit of practicing reading and writing research articles on their own. For example:

I am looking for information online in other schools. By reading others' articles, consulting a dictionary, memorizing (chunks of useful expressions), and keeping a journal, writing can improve naturally.

Dai-Wei remembered that "we have to write many reflections, such as teaching feedback, [and] class discussions online, or send an email to everyone about our view points on each book chapter", and Yu-Chuan started from reading journal articles and underlining the sentences he/she likes. "Well, I will begin with reading, reading lots of journal articles and underlining good sentences."

c.3 *Preferred needs for solid EAP writing instruction*
Despite their regular writing habits, some participants reported concerns about their limited writing proficiency, including collocations and overall writing skills. Some yearned for more teacher feedback to improve their writing, whereas no constructive feedback was offered to them. For example, Mei-li reported that "In fact, my teacher did not return my report to me. I only saw my final score. I don't know their feedback for improvement.

Mei-li seemed to get little feedback from her teachers, yet she expressed her urgent need for the enhancement of her writing ability. Although much writing research on peer review (Berg, 1999), trained peer response (Tsui & Ng, 2000, and teacher feedback (Zhang, 1995; Hyland, 1998) has indicated the benefits of improving students' writing skills, future research may investigate the factors and the writing professionals' minds about providing students with corrective feedback in graduate school courses.

It is paradoxical to the researcher that writing professionals complained about students' lack of writing proficiency; on the other hand, writing courses were not offered or well-designed to suit students' needs for improving their writing. Mei-li once said her department does not offer research paper writing courses, but she found it "extremely necessary." In addition, Dai-Wei expected his writing instructor to teach him fundamental writing skills, including report verbs and tenses: "I think [the course instructor] needs to help students with the usage of words, like *indicate*, *suggest*, and some *tense concepts*, which I find crucial."

Dai-Wei expressed that there is not much literature on his topic, which may be difficult for him to conduct research. However, Mei-li was honest with the researcher that she did not know how to use the database to find literature. Mei-li asked the researcher to recommend some resource books and asked for some information on SSCI journals. Mei-li, after the interview, said that she was grateful to the researcher for providing her with useful resources, and that she found her research direction and made a huge stride, which may echo Li's (2007)

"reality-altering" effect, also termed catalytic validity by Lather (1986), on the participant(s).

d. Interacting with the global research community

Finally, some ambitious participants aspired to submit their journals and endeavored to enter the community of literacy practices. Their interaction with the global research community may be an important indicator of becoming a full-fledged, competent research article writer (Li, 2007). They may engage with the literature and learn textual borrowing as a new writing genre so that they eventually acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to participate in the community of practice in L2 academic writing.

4. CONCLUSION

To summarize, the four participants held different attitudes and motivations toward graduate school courses and displayed diverse engagement with the community of academic writing, either locally or globally. Yet, not every learner could obtain necessary research assistance from their thesis advisors and writing courses.

Pedagogical implications for course designers and EAP trainers as well as thesis advisors are that endeavors need to be made to address the needs of graduate student's studies. Additionally, advisors are considered important knowledge providers and mentors. Therefore, to assist learners in completing their research articles, more in-service teachers, as Li (2007) advocated, need to be trained. Future research may probe into writing professionals' training about advising graduate students to complete a fuller picture in the literature.

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