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L2 Disciplinary Writing at An English Medium University: Chinese Undergraduates' Perceptions and Practices

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Current trend towards the internationalization of higher education

- English as a medium of instruction (EMI)
- Writing as the means of constructing disciplinary knowledge, as well as demonstrating academic attainments
- For Chinese students, disciplinary writing in English as a foreign language
- Different from traditional approaches to English writing instruction that focus on language accuracy and complexity

Discussions on the multifaceted nature of L2 writing

- Learning to Write: process oriented and genre approaches to L2 writing; writing in the EAP class
- Writing-to-Learn language and skills: SLA approaches to L2 writing (Writing-to-Learn Language; WLL); writing in the general English class
- Writing-to-Learn the content of the discipline: writing as a mode of learning (Writing-to-Learn Content; WLC); writing in the disciplines
- (e.g. Canagarajah, 2011; Hirvela, 2011; Hyland, 2011; Hyland, 2013a; Manchón, 2009; 2011)

Research aims

- How do Chinese EFL students studying in EMI settings respond to the changing (and challenging) role of L2 writing in their disciplinary learning?
- Students' perceptions and practices of writing in the disciplines in English as a foreign language (EFL) in an English medium setting, where the ability of disciplinary writing in English is crucial to students' achievement of academic success.

Institutional context of the study:

- An English medium university established in 2006 in partnership between Xi'an Jiaotong University and the University of Liverpool
- Degree programmes in the disciplines of science, engineering, social sciences, and humanities; all courses taught in English
- Faculty recruited globally expats + overseas returning Chinese
- The vast majority of student population recruited from the first tier of Gaokao
- Year 1: the foundation year, focusing on studying EAP
- Year 2 to Year 4: studying subject courses delivered in English

Participants and procedures

- 12 final year undergraduate students from two disciplines: six from English(Humanities) and another six from Urban Planning and Design (Social Sciences)
- one-on-one semi-structured interviews to elicit their accounts of disciplinary writing experiences at the EMI university
- In the first semester of final year, at the time when they were choosing the topic for their final year project, which was 10,000-word dissertation supervised by the faculty.

Results

Four broad themes emerging from the analysis:

- Language use in L2 disciplinary writing
- Perceptions of rhetorical norms and disciplinary conventions
- Valued practices in their writing in the disciplines
- The role of writing in developing disciplinary competences

Language use in L2 disciplinary writing

- *I think language is still very important, this is a common aspect between year 1 and year 4. If your language is not accurate, no matter how good your ideas are, others perhaps won't understand what you've written. (ENG)*
- *I think the basic thing is to learn English grammar well, then the academic style, and learn the native speakers' ways of expressing, and understand how to write more natural, more academic. (UPD)*
- *I feel the tutors don't pay much attention to those basics in writing, they focus on how well you understand the subject knowledge. (UPD)*



Language use in L2 disciplinary writing

- *To be honest, I'm not afraid of understanding subject theories, usually I Baidu the Chinese equivalents first to get an understanding of the concepts. So, understanding the subject concepts is not a problem, I can get lots of information very quickly as long as they are in Chinese. But accurately expressing what I understood in English is the biggest problem, especially when specialized terms are involved. (UPD)*



Language use in L2 disciplinary writing

- *We had a group project surveying the living conditions of low-class people in Shanghai. Much of the work involved translating Chinese into English. We interviewed local residents and had to summarize and translate their interviews to English. It was a bit beyond our ability. Because that research topic was a Chinese local issue, most of the references we found were in Chinese, and that required translation as well. Perhaps our English was not at that level, we had to rely very much on the electronic dictionaries to look for words, so some words might not sound academic, or have different meanings. There might be some problems in both translation and expression. Our tutor might not understand what we wrote. (UPD)*

Perceptions of rhetorical norms and disciplinary conventions

- *The main kind of writing is reports, and sometimes essays. You first have some key points, then look for the literature, and then put them in the big context of China to see if they are suitable. Last time we did a rather peculiar assignment called policy memorandum. (UPD)*
- *In year 1, you would be given writing topics, and you had some common knowledge about them. It's like writing IELTS essays. In year 3 and 4, you must read those course books. If you don't read them carefully, you don't know what and how to write, very discipline-specific. (ENG)*

Perceptions of rhetorical norms and disciplinary conventions

- *Sometimes the professors' requirements are not clear, which lead to our misunderstanding; sometimes they use the kind of native-speaker English that we don't understand. Once a professor used a phrase in the coursework instructions, something called "art of state", or "state of art"? He didn't explain its meaning. We discussed it but couldn't figure it out, so had to go to ask him in the end for clarification. It took a lot of time. (UPD)*
- *We once had a tutor whose assignment specifications were very complicated, but gave no indication of the type of structure, so we didn't know what kind of writing structure to follow, feel helpless. (UPD)*

Valued practices in writing in the disciplines

- *The important thing is just to read a lot, read things relevant to your major. You will learn more vocabulary and how to structure your own writing; try to imitate scholar's writing style as much as possible. (ENG)*
- *Reading, reading English articles is more helpful to us, especially those on the recommended reading list. Because it builds up academic vocabulary; and we can try to imitate how they write. (UPD)*



The role of writing in developing disciplinary competences

- *For that assignment, I designed a survey and administered to local people, I then obtained results from the data. I was also satisfied with the analysis, because the results turned out to be very similar to those reported in a published article. I felt somewhat like a professional. (UPD)*
- *I feel most competent when doing the translation assignment, because you can look for the source text yourself and you decide on the text that is most interesting to you, so when translating, you are fully into it. Moreover, when writing the commentary, your explanations are not too theoretical, and you have more freedom to express your thinking. (ENG)*



Common features between the two disciplines

- For L2 students who write in the disciplines in English as a foreign language, their language needs can still be a prominent issue and should be carefully taken into account, along with the development of disciplinary knowledge and abilities.
- Faculty teachers' lack of attention to language errors can unsettle students who come from educational cultures that emphasize the importance of corrective feedback (Hyland, 2013a).

Common features between the two disciplines

- Expert writing as models of the discipline-specific ways of reasoning and argument.
- For students who are accustomed to imitating model essays in their English classes, they naturally resort to writing exemplars specific to the discipline when they are writing for subject courses.
- Imitating expert models is different from students' language re-use from source texts, which is often concerned with copying phrasal and sentential units in composing text (Flowerdew & Li, 2007; 2009; Shi, 2004). It is a strategy of genre learning by novice academic writers to master the way by which disciplinary knowledge is constructed and communicated in the community.

Differences across the disciplines

- Extensive use of L1 sources by students in Urban Planning and Design, and translation as a mediational process in disciplinary writing.
- The ability to translate source texts from L1 suggests extra linguistic resources that L2 writers can use in their disciplinary writing.
- See L2 students not as linguistically deficient writers who have to overcome language hurdles, but as resourceful writers, for whom differences in language can be a resource for producing meaning in writing.

Differences across the disciplines

- UPD students aspire to the construction of apprentice identity in their field by means of conforming to the disciplinary conventions
- English students are keen to gain a sense of creativity and critical thinking in their writing through which they can voice their idiosyncratic views.

Conclusion

- The multiple goals of L2 disciplinary writing: Learning to write; Writing to learn the language; Writing to learn the disciplinary content and conventions
- The role of L1 language and knowledge in disciplinary learning and teaching, particularly for L2 students who learn to apply disciplinary knowledge to their L2 local environment and context.
- Maximizing L2 students bilingual knowledge and resources is not only a pedagogical issue subject faculty and writing scholars, but a matter deserving thorough examination in the process of policy making in adopting English as a medium for disciplinary learning and teaching.

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Thank you!