

## **L2 postgraduate students' conceptions of English academic writing: Perspectives of mainland Chinese students**

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Although countless L2 students need to write in English for academic purposes and there is consensus in the literature that conception of writing is an aspect of writing expertise, the conceptions of English academic writing of L2 postgraduate students remain under-researched. This paper reports on a study that examines mainland Chinese postgraduate students' conceptions of English academic writing through individual interviews. It defines conceptions of writing as writers' general understanding of writing, beliefs about writing development, and attitudes towards writing-related support. The study found that students: tend to understand English academic writing as the written form of advanced general English, believe in self-directed practice for writing progress, and are more interested in writing support that targets draft improvement than long-term writing development. The findings are interpreted by considering the possible problems observed in student conceptions of writing. Pedagogical implications are suggested in order to better respond to these problems and students' needs in English writing.

**Keywords:** L2 postgraduate students; English academic writing; conceptions of writing; Hong Kong

### **Introduction**

Student conceptions of a domain of skill influence their approaches to it, engagement in learning, and ultimately their learning outcomes and academic achievement (McLean, 2001; Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004). Thus, understanding students' conceptions of writing is important in order to understand their approaches and performance in writing (Johns, 2002; Mateos & Sole, 2012). Despite an overall interest in this topic and particular attention to L2 students' perspectives of English writing, previous studies mainly focus on how students perceive writing-related issues, for example, their difficulties in writing, attitudes towards writing assessment and feedback, and themselves as writers (Campbell, Smith, & Brooker, 1998; He & Shi, 2008; Wu & Zhang, 2017). However, little is known about how students conceive of L2 writing. In the literature that does exist (e.g., Mateos & Sole, 2012), attention is mostly on undergraduate students, leaving much unknown about postgraduates' conceptions of writing. With the expansion of internationalisation there are increasing numbers of L2 students undertaking postgraduate studies in English. This suggests a need to examine more closely how these students conceive of English writing in order to more effectively respond to their needs in this respect.

Internationalisation in universities is widespread in Asia including those in Hong Kong (Fok, 2007). This paper reports on an interview-based exploration with 27 mainland Chinese postgraduates in an English-medium university in Hong Kong with the aim of understand their conceptions of English academic writing. It focuses on

students' understanding and beliefs about English academic writing, paying attention to their personal theories, assumptions, and metaphors when talking about writing and writing development; it also looks at the students' attitudes towards writing-related supports to explore their beliefs of what experience may bring progress to their writing.

### **Research on conceptions of writing**

Conception is an important notion in teaching and learning research, particularly in studies of teacher knowledge and teaching expertise. Conceptions are “specific meanings attached to phenomena which mediate our response to situations involving these phenomena” (Pratt, 1992, p. 204). Conceptions are different from perceptions because they involve “a more general mental structure, encompassing beliefs, meanings, concepts, propositions, rules, mental images, preferences, and the like” (Thompson, 1992, cited in Barnes, Fives, & Dacey, 2017, p. 108). As a construct, conception integrates an individual’s knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes of a certain practice and overcomes the challenge of investigation the three at the same time (Barnes et al., 2017). Understood in this way, students’ writing conceptions include their knowledge and interpretation of writing, beliefs of how writing develops, and attitudes towards the support of writing.

Studies on conceptions of writing generally follow three strands of inquiry, focusing on: the link between conception and actions in specific writing tasks; conception types and how they are related to writing performance; and dimensions and development of conception. Earlier research associates conceptions with metacognition and attempts to establish a link between writing conceptions and strategies for a specific task. Writing tasks have been defined as ill-defined problems and writing as a problem-solving process; accordingly, conception (i.e., metacognitive awareness) influences writers’ approaches to the task (Flower & Hayes, 1981). It was also suggested that “writing is applied metacognition” (Hacker, Keener, & Kircher, 2009, p. 154) and that “the essential characteristic of expertise in writing is a matter of mastering problem-solving” (Tynjälä, Mason, & Lonka, 2001, p. 11).

Other research goes beyond task-specific writing conceptions and focuses on how general writing conceptions influence writers’ selection and implementation of writing strategies with particular attention given to expert-novice differences. For example, Dall’Alba and Sandberg (2006) found that experienced professionals have sophisticated conceptions of writing in their field and Yore, Hand, and Florence (2004) suggested that writing conceptions are strongly consistent with writing expertise.

Other research has focused on the types of writing conceptions. For example, it was proposed that there are “knowledge telling” and “knowledge transforming” types of conceptions, which exert continual influence on students’ approaches and engagement with writing (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1989). Moreover, certain writing conceptions seem associated with good writing performance. For example, students who conceive of writing as a practice of knowledge reconstruction are more likely to attend to organisational structures and argumentative effectiveness of their writing (Campbell et al., 1998). Researchers also made efforts to develop inventories of writing conceptions. Particularly relevant to postgraduates is the research of Lavelle and Bushrow (2007) which found that students’ conceptions include the notions that writing is a process of meaning-making, a painful task, and an activity of rebuilding thinking; and that students recognise that writing requires well-formulated plans, adherence to conventions, and reiterative revisions of drafts.

While these studies contribute to understanding of student writing conceptions, they were later problematized for the underlying assumption that conception is monolithic, constant, and can be quantitatively captured. As a result, researchers distinguish conceptions into the cognitive and affective dimensions and try to establish whether conceptions persist in contextual changes. For example, Ohata and Fukao (2014) investigated ten Japanese undergraduates and found their conceptions of reading developed with their reading experiences. Though this study is not directly focused on writing, their findings affirm that conceptions of literacy practices are not static but evolve with students' learning experience.

Although previous studies demonstrate the importance of student conceptions of writing, more work is needed in some areas. First, attention was mainly on undergraduate students, thus, limiting the generalisability of findings to postgraduates' conceptions. Second, among the few studies of postgraduates' perspectives, the focus was either on the affective aspect of conceptions (e.g., anxiety, perceived difficulties, see, for example, Carlino, 2012) or on providing pre-designed items to elicit student views (see, for example, Wu & Zhang, 2017). As a result, there is no evidence for the extent to which students have a sophisticated understanding of the aspects of writing or how they view writing development and relevant support. A notable exception is the work of Keranen, Encinas, and Bazerman (2012) who investigated Mexican writers' beliefs of English academic writing development and found that L2 writers value extensive reading (both academic and non-academic texts), speaking, and immersion in the disciplinary discourse for English academic writing development.

The current study starts with the stance that there is a need to understand not only how L2 students perceive writing-related issues but also their theories and beliefs of what constitutes English academic writing, how writing performance develops, and what support is useful to them. Guided by the general question of what conceptions of English academic writing are held by L2 postgraduates, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are key aspects of English academic writing from the perspective of mainland Chinese postgraduate students in Hong Kong?
2. According to these students, how does academic English writing develop?
3. What are these students' attitudes towards writing-related support at their university?

### **Research methods**

This study employed an interview-based qualitative approach to investigate L2 students' conceptions of English academic writing. The participants were 27 mainland Chinese postgraduates at a university in Hong Kong. They were randomly recruited through a poster and snowball sampling, that is, those who agreed to participate in the study were asked to recommend one or two others they were acquainted with. The participants' English proficiency levels were IELTS 6.5-7.5, with no prior experience in English-medium education. They all had little or no experience with English writing for academic purposes except infrequent short essays for prior English language courses. At the time of data collection, they had been studying in their programmes for periods ranging from one month to four years (Table 1).

Table 1. Background information and interview length of participants

Identifier	Faculty	Proficiency (IELTS)	Program status	Interview (min)
ARC01	Architecture	6.5	Year 1	28
ARC02	Architecture	6.5	Year 4	34
ART03*	Arts	7	Year 1	42
ART04	Arts	7.5	Year 3	55
ECO05	Economics	6.5	Year 2	22
ECO06	Economics	7	Year 3	30
ECO07	Economics	6.5	Year 1	40
EDU08	Education	6.5	Year 3	35
EDU09	Education	6.5	Year 4	42
EDU10*	Education	7	Year 2	37
EDU11	Education	6.5	Year 1	50
ENG12	Engineering	6.5	Year 1	25
ENG13	Engineering	6.5	Year 4	53
ENG14	Engineering	6.5	Year 2	34
ENG15	Engineering	6.5	Year 3	38
LAW16	Law	7.5	Year 2	35
LAW17	Law	7.5	Year 1	28
MED18	Medicine	6.5	Year 3	26
MED19	Medicine	6.5	Year 2	27
MED20	Medicine	6.5	Year 2	29
SCI21	Science	6.5	Year 4	42
SCI22	Science	6.5	Year 3	35
SCI23	Science	6.5	Year 1	39
SSC24*	Social Science	7	Year 2	37
SSC25	Social Science	6.5	Year 3	39
SSC26	Social Science	6.5	Year 4	40
SSC27	Social Science	7	Year 1	51

Note: \* indicates MPhil students, all others were PhD candidates

The participants were spread across nine faculties. Drawing on Becher's (1994) distinction of hard-pure, hard-applied, soft-pure, and soft-applied disciplines, this study used participants' field of study to categorise them as students of soft disciplines (Architecture, Arts, Education, Economics, Law, and Social Science) or students of hard disciplines (Engineering, Medicine, Science) (Table 2).

Each participant was interviewed once between late September and late October 2015. The interviews were semi-structured, focusing on participants': 1) understanding of English academic writing, especially key aspects that constitute writing (e.g., what the phrase English academic writing means to them or what images and examples come to mind when talking about English academic writing); 2) beliefs of how English academic writing is learned, focusing on the processes and practices that participants deemed as important, and 3) attitudes towards writing-related resources (e.g., support and courses). The interviews were 22-55 minutes long and conducted face-to-face in Mandarin Chinese, the first language of the researcher and participants, to facilitate productive discussion.

Table 2. Categorisation of participants as hard and soft disciplines<sup>1</sup>

Category	Pure	Applied	
Hard	Science (n=3)	Engineering (n=4) Medicine (n=3) Law (n=2) Social science (n=4)	n= 10
Soft	Arts (n=2)	Education (n=4) Economics (n=3) Architecture (n=2)	n= 17

Analysis of the interviews was largely concurrent with data collection. Initial analysis was started after three interviews in order to identify issues and topics to explore in subsequent interviews. More in-depth analysis was conducted after all interviews were completed. In analysing the data, MAXQDA was utilised for data storage, coding, and retrieval. A particularly desirable feature of this software is that it allows audio coding. In the first round of analysis, each interview recording was listened to multiple times and segments were coded according to the focus of the study. The coded audio segments were later verbatim transcribed, and then submitted to comparison and aggregation based on the similarities and differences of views within and across participants.

## Findings

### *Understanding of English academic writing*

Students' understanding of English academic writing generally fell into two categories: academic English as the advanced level of general English and as a distinct register. These views were not in opposition and not exclusive, indeed, many participants expressed both views (Table 3).

Most participants (20 out of 27) described English academic writing as the written form of advanced general English and related it to certain surface features (i.e., vocabulary, grammar, text organisation). They regarded lexical "advancedness/academic-ness" and lexical range as defining features, saying that academic English consists in "the use of academic words" and "using advanced words and technical terms". Many associated their difficulties in academic writing to insufficient lexical knowledge, explaining that "my words are too simple; my writing reads like primary students' [work]" (EDU09), and "my words are too limited.... when I'm writing, it feels like I'm trying to make a feast with the least exciting ingredients" (ARC01). Students with relatively higher L2 proficiency were also concerned, as LAW16 noted, "being able to recognize those [general academic] words is one thing, but using them is another. ... I can't put those words into proper use".

Participants also listed certain grammatical features (tense, voice, and sentence frames) as the key aspects of academic writing. They talked about avoiding active voice, believing that "passive voice is better... [it] makes your writing appear more academic" (SSC25). They also mentioned collecting certain sentence frames, citing examples of "In this paper, we focus on the need for..." (ECO06); "The research on ... is very meaningful for many applications" (ENG13). They associated writing challenges with their confusion in tense choices, saying that "I'm not sure which tense to use"

(ARC01), and "I often make mistakes, but I can't tell where went wrong in the tense of my paper" (MED19).

Table 3. Grouping of views of English academic writing

View of English academic writing (participants)	Aspects mentioned	Instances
Advanced general English (20)	-Lexical range and features	Enthusiasm, concerns, and reported efforts in words and grammar
	-Grammatical choice and features	
	-Consistent organisational features	Recognition of the general structure
A distinct register (19)	-Users of academic communities	Notes of academics as the users
	-Selling research ideas as the purpose	Recognition of the communicative purposes

Another view among participants was that academic English is a distinct register that results from specific preferences of its users, serving academic purposes, and characterising particular organisational patterns. Two-thirds (19 of 27 students) spoke of a "constant pattern" in English academic writing, noting the presence of sections and consistent organisation. They commented, "there is a writing template: introduction, literature, methods, results and discussion" (SCI21); "academic writing is reporting one's research thoughts in relatively fixed format" (SSC24). Some participants (five of them) indirectly mentioned the consistent textual features, reasoning that some sections are more transparent in structure and easier to produce (e.g., MED19, SCI22, SSC26). Some common remarks were, "materials and procedures is not that difficult" (SCI21), but "discussion is very challenging because the structure is more flexible and requires more skills to organise ideas in exact language" (ECO06).

Participants also recognised the users and communicative purposes of academic writing, and associated certain features (i.e., citations, tables and figures, notes) with user preferences and purposes. For example:

Words and grammar are important but not the core. They are like raw materials to achieve certain goals, to sell ideas. (SSC22)

academic English is scientific English, used by researchers to exchange research ideas (SCI22)

academic writing is the means to communicate with colleagues (ENG15)

academic English is the language in journal papers and conferences (EDU11)

Students also noted citations, figures, and footnotes as features to serve communicative purposes among academics. More than half (17 of the 27) commented that "citation is the most immediately noticeable feature" (ART04 as an example). Some, often hard sciences students, held that the presence of tables and figures is a hallmark of academic writing, arguing that "figures are the most important; we must ensure figures well presented in our writing." (SCI22). Interestingly, some students of

soft disciplines (history, sociology, and law) listed footnotes as an important feature, for example:

...to construct effective arguments, experienced scholars use notes to differentiate core and peripheral message (SSC26)

[tried to] give important but not central background information of a concept [in the notes] (LAW16)

### ***Beliefs of L2 academic writing development***

Students' beliefs about L2 academic development centred around four key themes: reading exposure, writing practice, imitation, and seeking feedback, which were categorised as self-directed practice and other-induced discovery of meaning and writing convention. In most students' eyes (25 participants), L2 academic writing develops with regular, continual, and repetitive reading. They held that "writing relies on reading of course" (ARC02) and "there is no trick but reading" (ECO07). Some students emphasised attention to language features, arguing that "simply reading is not enough; we should examine what language is used" (SCI22); perhaps for this reason, many participants (15 students) spoke of "taking notes of useful language" (ENG12) and "reading twice or more when running into useful language" (EDU08). They also mentioned attention to text features, saying that "it's important to extract rules of how to organize writing. ...Putting eyes on the patterns will help build our writing model" (SSC27).

Participants also noted the value of regular writing and purposeful imitation. Many (20 students) believed that "practice makes perfect"; when prompted for the rationale of their belief in practice, EDU09 gave a representative view:

Learning to write is different from learning a foreign language. Although we can learn some new words by reading, if we don't write, we can't practice our thinking and logic.

LAW16 provided another reason why they valued practice, saying that:

We can only write clearly when our ideas are clear. To clarify ideas, the best way is to discuss with others, the next best is to write. ...writing itself is the most important way to improve writing.

Participants also lauded imitation as a key means to writing progress, as ART03 asserted, "there's no better way than imitation. We can imitate good writers' sentences and paragraphs." Similar responses were often heard, for example:

I often put three or four papers at hand to aide my writing (SCI23)

I have to look at models when I'm writing (ARC01)

I imitate others' words and style" (SSC26)

Some students mentioned copying published sources to approximate expert language and idea arrangement. For example:

I usually open eight or ten papers on my topic, then cut and paste, one sentence from a paper, the next from another. The key is ... the order of your sentences because it reflects your logic. (ENG13)

In addition to the self-directed practice, participants spoke of the benefits of others' perspectives for their draft improvements and writing knowledge development. Many students (18 participants) mentioned that others' feedback is the key for them to discover their inadequacies and the conventions of academic writing. They talked about how supervisors, friends and paid editing services improved their drafts. For instance, EDU10 held that "comments are very important because they can help us realise where we didn't write clearly, so that we can improve the drafts"; LAW16 similarly noted "suggestions from others help improve my writing". Despite this, they realised that feedback is an ad hoc means for draft improvement, as illustrated in SSC25's words:

others' comments are useful, but I have to say, comments are not always available or on time. They only come after I completed my writing. Then the important issue comes, what if I run out of time to improve my work? However, this is very common. Ideally, we should have someone guiding us, from scattered ideas to a writing, someone who teaches us those key aspects [of writing]; if not, we have to be observant of how experts write and actively seeking comments. (SSC25)

#### ***Attitudes towards writing-related support***

In terms of attitudes towards writing-related support, participants were generally positive about postgraduate EAP courses and disciplinary content courses for enriching their writing knowledge. They were also interested in continual EAP support and editing services.

Commenting on a genre-based thesis writing course offered by the university, thirteen of the seventeen students of soft disciplines were positive. According to them, the course:

for the first time systematically tells us how to write a thesis (ART03)

introduces useful rules of writing academic English (EDU08)

suggests good materials so we know where to find [resources] when I need to (LAW17)

Some students particularly valued the genre approach, for example:

I had vague ideas, but I didn't know what I should write in each part, or how to put my ideas in order. This course introduced a very useful figure, like an hour-glass, and suggested we start from the most general all the way to a gap. It was very useful. I followed the structure in my confirmation report and my supervisor liked it. (SSC24)

However, more than half (7 of 10) students of hard sciences held reserved attitude about the same course, saying that "it's useful to some degree, but I still have difficulties in writing" (MED18) and "the course suggests useful resources, like websites to search synonyms and collocations, but sometimes the teacher couldn't explain very clearly" (ENG14). On rare occasions, participants were critical:



English teachers don't know how we [chemists] write. They don't publish in our journals. Once, I followed suggestions from the writing class, but my supervisor changed much of my manuscript. (SCI22)

Students' remarks on disciplinary courses were consistently positive, recognising "an osmosis effect of those classes for training us how to think and write" (SSC26). Some students appreciated discussion of writing in disciplinary courses, saying "in some course, the teacher would select one or two assignments and ask us to discuss how to strengthen the logic and argument, this kind of discussion is very useful" (LAW17). Others expressed interests in more opportunities for explicit training by disciplinary teachers:

I didn't know how to write; especially in the beginning [when] I didn't understand the courses very well; every assignment was like a challenging test. The teachers said my writing wasn't clear or I didn't show enough critical thinking. ...it would be much better if they had taught or clearly stated their criteria, like how to show the critical thinking. (EDU09)

Finally, most students (20 out of 27 participants) were positive about continual EAP support like workshops and tutorials on academic writing (ARC02, ECO06, EDU10, ENG15, MED18); however, few mentioned actually utilising this support for reasons of either "I didn't know that we have such resources" (SSC24) or "I'm too busy to attend workshops and tutorials" (SCI22). Perhaps for these and similar reasons, almost all participants (25 of 27 students) discussed their need of editing services, especially "those supplied by people of our field" (ENG13).

## Discussion

This study started from the stance that students' views and theories of writing should be considered, a position that is aligned with the perspective that student views are core aspects to understand teaching and learning English for academic purposes (Benesch, 1996). By categorising conceptions into understanding, beliefs, and attitudes of writing-related issues, this study has profiled different aspects of L2 students' mental lives in relation to English academic writing.

The findings show that students tend to understand academic writing as a composite of specialised lexical (i.e., technical terms and advanced academic words) and grammatical features. Participants were enthusiastic about lexical and grammatical features in writing and were satisfied with collecting these local features for better writing performance. However, such understandings are partial because attaining academic literacy requires "awareness of the entire communication process" (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012, p. 296). Also, their reference to *academic words* seemed merely a convenient cover term for words that were unfamiliar or seemingly advanced rather than the noun groups of high information density as writing experts have suggested about academic English (see Snow & Uccelli, 2009). In this sense, this finding is consistent with Johns' (2002) observation that "student theories of academic texts are often in direct opposition to the genre theorists' complex ideas" and that students' understanding of writing can be "very limited and constricting" (p. 239).

The current study also shows that students often associate writing development with self-directed practice and other-induced discovery. Underlying the first belief is the rationale of self-reliance, that is, writing improves as a result of students' own efforts. While such belief is sensible to some extent, it may not be helpful. Writing academic

texts in an L2 is a complicated process and practice does not always lead to success (Schneider & Fujishima, 1995). As a result, students' self-efficacy in English academic writing may be damped, which then influences their efforts and performance (Carlino, 2012; Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012). In addition, as demonstrated in previous studies (e.g., Aitchison, 2009; Carlino, 2012), students could benefit more if they realize that writing development is a social practice and that interacting with others is also an important means to gain insights and performance improvement in writing. In addition, students' imitation strategies, ensuing from their belief that imitation leads to mastery of expert writers' practice, may subject them to charges of plagiarism.

The data on students' beliefs about the value of feedback shows disappointment with the availability and timing of feedback. Since students' access to feedback is highly varied and contingent (Wang & Li, 2011), they must be proactive. However, in this study, few students mentioned any efforts to actively seek feedback. This suggests a need for pedagogical measures to improve guidance.

Finally, this study discovered students' attitudes towards different writing-related support. Participants' responses indicate that they are more inclined to text-improvement support than writer-improvement support. That is, they are enthusiastic about editing services but less ready to invest their time in support that cultivates writing knowledge. This finding is consistent with studies of undergraduate preferred strategies for writing tests (see, for example, He & Shi, 2008), that is, in the face of high-stakes writing, students would opt for support that brings immediate improvement to their writing rather than invest in honing their writing skills. Such attitudes are problematic as they may negatively impact how students engage with EAP courses as has been noted elsewhere (Cheng, 2008).

These findings of the current study are consistent with a remark made thirty years ago, but apparently still true today, that "there is often a large gap between what students bring to the academic community and what the academic community expects of them" (Spack, 1988, p. 30). It seems that L2 postgraduates are only partly aware of the expectations and conventions of English academic writing facing them. Their persistent attention to linguistic features indicates that they are too focused on the language components of writing without fully realising that postgraduate writing and successful academic participation requires a comprehension of academic genres and genre practice, which includes knowledge of the forms, processes, and rhetoric of writing (Tardy, 2009). In addition, while participants noted well the importance of reading and writing for writing development, more nuanced conceptions in these respects may be beneficial for them to iron out the conflicting facts that writing difficulties persist regardless of practice and to implement more effective literacy practice in the future.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides a point of entry to writing conceptions held by L2 postgraduate students within the context of a Hong Kong internationalised university. The findings may be relevant to a wider context but it is possible that the influence of participants' cultural and educational backgrounds are significant (Zhu, Valcke, & Schellens, 2008) and that is an issue worthy of further research.

One implication of the study is that EAP courses should not only introduce patterns of English academic writing, but also instil in students accurate, nuanced, and sophisticated conceptions of writing in general and in their disciplines. This may be achieved by integrating components into courses in which students are encouraged to

reflect, share, and critique their conceptions of writing with the guidance of EAP professionals. Moreover, teachers may try to cultivate students' awareness of the context of academic English (including the purposes, readers, and setting of the register); they may also teach students to go beyond surface features to recognise and implement disciplinary meaning-making schema in reading and writing English for academic purposes.

## Note

1. This categorisation may be open to disagreement, for instance, Arts may be regarded as distinct. In this study, the two Arts students study literature and history and thus fit Becher's description of soft, pure disciplines.

## About the author

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