

**ACADEMIC WRITING EXPERIENCE OF
CHINESE POSTGRADUATE TAUGHT STUDENTS
AT A UK UNIVERSITY**

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Abstract

This study examines the difficulties faced by Chinese postgraduate students studying in the UK in terms of academic English writing and their experiences in developing strategies for academic writing practices. The academic literacies approach (Lea and Street, 2006) and the concept of writing as a social practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Street, 2003) provide the theoretical frameworks for examining the experiences and challenges encountered by Chinese postgraduate taught (PGT) students in their academic writing. Rather than treating writing solely as a skill or technique, this study conceptualizes it as a social practice. It contends that learning is a process of evolving participation within a community of practice, emphasizing its inherently social and situated nature (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

The study took a mixed-method approach. Students from the School of Business and the School of Education at a UK university were selected as the participants. Data were collected through 104 questionnaires, 30 one-on-one semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis of six students' writing assignments.

The study reveals that in addition to English language barriers, Chinese students faced other difficulties in academic writing practices, such as unfamiliar writing styles, tutors' requirements, and unfamiliar evaluation criteria. This situation is caused not only by cultural differences in terms of teaching and learning between the UK and China but also by the traditional model of teaching English as a foreign language in China. The rote learning model and the examination-based assessment have posed negative effects on teaching and learning the English language and writing in schools and universities in China. The findings suggest that Chinese students' academic writing experience is complicated and influenced by multiple layers of social, cultural and linguistic factors. In order to adapt to the postgraduate-level writing in the UK university, Chinese students have to deal with culture shock, learning shock and unfamiliar social relations.

In light of the rapid increase in the number of Chinese international students studying in the United Kingdom and the ongoing reforms in English language instruction in China, these research findings hold significant implications for enhancing the English writing skills of Chinese international students. The study offers new insights into the improvement of Chinese students' English academic writing and challenges the current education on English academic writing in the UK higher education. It encourages UK university tutors to listen to Chinese students' voices and assist them to meet the postgraduate-level standards for academic writing. In addition, English language teaching in China should also be aligned internationally with a focus on students' application of English, gradually shifting from English for General Purposes (EGP) to English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CEAPA	China's English for Academic Purposes Association
CET	College English Test
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
ESL	English as a Second Language
EGP	English for General Purposes
EMI	English medium instruction
ESL	English as a second language
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
L2	Second Language
MA	Master of Arts
PGT	Postgraduate Taught Student
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
TEM	Test for English Majors
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
UKCISA	UK Council for International Student Affairs
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This thesis examines the difficulties Chinese students have with English academic writing during their MA programmes in the UK and the strategies they use to cope – and sometimes overcome – these difficulties. To address this, a mixed-method case study framework was employed to understand 1) what are the academic writing experiences of Chinese Postgraduate Taught students at a UK university? 2) what difficulties do Chinese postgraduate students encounter in their English academic writing? 3) what resources and support do Chinese Postgraduate Taught students expect to get to help them with their academic writing. Based on the analysis of the data, the thesis then discusses the implications for English teaching reform in Chinese universities. It argues that English education in Chinese universities needs to be reformed and Chinese students need to be better prepared for their MA studies in the UK, before coming to the UK.

This chapter will first provide an overview of the context of English language education in China. This is important because, as I will show, the Chinese academic and cultural context is one of the major factors contributing to Chinese students' difficulties in writing English. Secondly, to extend the overview of the educational system, it also analyzes the quality of English education in China and the difficulties and challenges Chinese students encounter in learning English, especially in English writing. These discussions lay a solid foundation for a further in-depth analysis of the difficulties and the need for help in English writing for Chinese students. In addition, this chapter outlines the research question, and presents the research rationale and purpose. Finally, it highlights the significance of the research and provides an overview of the upcoming nine chapters.

1.2 Background of Chinese English Education

This section provides an overview of the Chinese education system. In particular, it describes the teaching of English at pre-university and university levels and analyzes the teaching of

English and English writing in English and non-English departments in Chinese universities. By understanding the context of English language learning at the postgraduate-level in China, this paper can better clarify the impact of English language teaching and learning in China on Chinese students and on academic English writing in the UK.

1.2.1 English Language Teaching in China

There are four levels of education in China: primary school, junior high school, senior high school and higher education, all of which exist as public or private institutions. Primary and junior secondary schools in China are compulsory and it takes nine years to complete the entire cycle, starting at the age of six. At the final stage, students are required to take a high school entrance exam. Depending on the exam results, students will enter either a general high school or a technical high school to continue their studies. Some students may give up further studies at the point of completing nine years of compulsory education and will start working. After completing the three years of upper secondary school, students take national examinations to enter different universities or vocational colleges. Depending on the field of study, higher education is available in three, four and five-year programmes.

Students start learning English from the third year of primary school but with changing attitudes to education, many schools and parents want children to learn English earlier. English is one of the most critical subjects in all stages of education in China because of its importance in entrance requirements the better high schools and universities demand (Qi, 2016). By treating English as simply another school subject, as reflected in China's exam-oriented teaching style and assessment models of study, the role of English as an international language of communication and exchange is ignored and as Wang (2020) has argued, this is detrimental to students.

1.2.2 English writing in Chinese universities

The 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Education in China (State Council, People's Republic of China, 2017) recognizes that undergraduate education and teaching needs to be

reformed extensively, underpinned by advanced international education and teaching experiences and promoting the overall development of education to the upper middle ranks of the world. As a general subject in undergraduate education, university English is an integral part of university education. Teaching English writing at university is one of the vital ways to facilitate the cultivation of complex and application-oriented skills that are needed in university education. Despite this, many studies have revealed that the English of Chinese university students is generally weak and falls short of the world's upper intermediate level (Wang and Guan, 2020). This is particularly true of their English writing and expression skills (Zheng and Yu, 2018; Qian et al., 2021). Writing is one of the basic skills that students need to master in English at the university level. According to Al-Jarrah et al. (2019), to a certain extent, the writing proficiency test is a concentrated test of students' comprehensive English application skills. University English should actively draw on advanced educational and teaching concepts and experiences while exploring effective ways of teaching writing to enhance students' English writing skills.

The global spread of English in academic contexts has led to its pervasive power over higher education around the world. One of the phenomena is the increasing number of students enrolling in international standardized tests such as the IELTS and TOEFL, to prove their language proficiency and thus gain access to study abroad. However, despite the efforts of both students and teachers, Chinese university students' written English is weak in international comparisons (Cai, 2015; Liu, 2021). For example, in the international assessment of English writing skills, Chinese candidates' writing was found to be weaker than candidates from other countries (Qian et al., 2021). In IELTS report of test results for 40 countries worldwide in 2021, the average score for Chinese candidates in the academic writing category was 5.76, ranking 32nd in the world in terms of writing. This figure is broadly in line with statistics from previous years (IELTS Test Taker Performance, 2021). The writing part of the IELTS test is scored on four criteria: completion of the writing task, coherence and convergence, vocabulary richness, and grammatical variety and accuracy (IELTS Scoring in Detail). Essays with a score of 5 in IELTS generally have the following issues: unclear arguments, inaccurate diction, unclear language, unclear paragraphing and single-minded expressions (IELTS Band Descriptors). In

addition, according to the Test and Score Data Summary for TOEFL iBT® Test (2010–2019), while Chinese students' TOEFL scores (total score of 120) increased from 77 in 2010 to 81 in 2019, the average score for writing (total score of 30) has not changed over the past 10 years and remains at 20. Poor English writing skills among Chinese students do not bode well for their studies abroad, as most higher education programmes abroad require a high level of English proficiency. Therefore, there is an urgent need to address the writing problems that Chinese students exhibit in English writing.

1.2.2.1 English Writing among non-English majors

Students across all university subjects are required to study English in the first and second years of their undergraduate studies. English teachers in universities mostly adopt a traditional teacher-centered approach that neglects the role of students in the classroom (Liu and Ren, 2021). Moreover, most teachers teach in Chinese, focusing on developing students' basic English grammar knowledge and vocabulary at the expense of their English expression and application. Thus all undergraduates are required to complete a small amount of English work and take an English exam at the end of each semester. This teaching model and the accompanying assessment method can affect students' future academic writing skills. Assessment (CET-4 and CET-6 examinations) consists of completing 120-150 word essays in English writing and exercises in class are designed to prepare for these exams. Assessment emphasizes errors in vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, etc. while paying little attention to their critical thinking and logical thinking skills. As a result, after university, most students have not acquired the ability to write and explain, express opinions or produce academic papers in English.

This then leads to students facing many difficulties and challenges when it comes to written assignments during their postgraduate studies in the UK. Firstly, due to insufficient training in writing at the undergraduate level, students have a low level of English writing, do not focus on expressing their ideas and lack the ability to think independently (Yang et al., 2006). Secondly, the interference of Chinese students' mother tongue and the lack of opportunities for students to use English in their daily lives lead to poor oral expression in English (Chu and Lou,

2022). In addition, students lack the motivation to strengthen their English writing and do not receive effective guidance and assistance (Gan et al., 2004; Zhang and Hyland, 2018; Hyland and Hyland, 2019).

1.2.2.2 English writing among English majors

Chinese undergraduates who choose English as their major can attend a range of English writing courses at the undergraduate level, all with a common goal, that is, to train students to write a text in standard English that incorporates coherence and logical structure, to organize and express their ideas accurately (Cai, 2017). However, due to the lack of books or specific syllabuses that are dedicated to academic writing, especially essay writing, teachers and students continue to give priority to English as a course of study instead of English as a tool for expressing their ideas (Zhang and Pramoolsook, 2022). Consequently, students do not have a good understanding of how to produce different kinds of texts and write about different topics in English. There are no special courses that teach them how to write academically. As with the exams described in the previous section, formal assessment consists of a written examination where the focus is primarily on accuracy and correctness, in other words, free of errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation and structure. By assessing these aspects, the purpose of writing as a communicative activity is entirely ignored. Such teaching methods and assessment criteria make it difficult for most students to improve and master academic English writing at the undergraduate level (Xie, 2019).

Chinese undergraduate English majors are required to take the TEM-4 and TEM-8 exams in the second and fourth years of university respectively. Apart from listening tests, multiple-choice questions and reading comprehension, students need to complete 200-word and 300-word essays in each of the two exams (Huang and You, 2018). These essays are similar to the IELTS essay, where students are required to complete short, logical essays expressing their views on the topic (Feng and Chen, 2016). However, these types of essays are very different from those that students will be required to complete during their postgraduate studies in the UK. Key differences are that university assignments are far longer, require referencing and citation and emphasize critical thinking skills (Clark and Yu, 2021).

Thus far the focus has been on what the students do at university. Turning now to the lecturers in the English department who deliver these courses, they do not have the skills needed to teach academic writing effectively. The teachers' procedures for teaching writing skills are in many ways failing and some of them use very traditional teaching methods that do not meet the standards and requirements in teaching English as a foreign language (Hyland, 2007). The focus tends to be more on linguistics and literature, highlighting the accuracy of students' use of the English language, rather than writing as a communicative activity. Successful writing is then seen mainly in terms of how students are able to apply grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation rules in their compositions. Thus, students primarily focus on word choice and grammatical accuracy in their writing rather than on expressing their ideas and fostering their critical thinking and independent thinking skills (Zhang, 2018).

Chinese students are not given the opportunity to develop their academic English writing at the university level and test-based English assessments also leave students with no motivation or extra-curricular opportunities to do so (Wang and Bai, 2021). As a result, most students face challenges in writing in English for academic purposes. When students arrive at a UK university, they have a very short time during which to sufficiently improve their English writing skills and their academic writing in particular, if they are to succeed in their educational programmes at the postgraduate-level.

1.2.3 The quality debate in Chinese English education

With economic development and the globalization of education, an increasing number of Chinese students who have enough academic English aptitude can acquire advanced information from websites and academic journals more easily, along with more chances to take part in international collaboration in diverse subjects (Cai and Liao, 2010). However, although many Chinese students can get high scores on different kinds of English tests, they cannot understand the literature and academic conferences that are held in English to improve their professional competence (Cai, 2015). Consequently, to fulfill the need to engage in academic and professional contexts, the Chinese Ministry of Education introduced a national syllabus named Guidelines for College English Teaching in 2013, emphasizing EAP (English for

Academic Purposes) rather than EGP (English for General Purposes) in English teaching in higher education (Cai, 2015). However, the development of EAP teaching faces multiple challenges in China (Cheng, 2016). For instance, English teachers in universities have been used to teaching English for general purposes and focusing on helping students achieve high test scores; they do not have sufficient knowledge about EAP teaching (Li and Wang, 2018). Hence, in the preliminary stages of English teaching reforms, teachers lacked confidence. Moreover, according to Cai (2017) and Kong (2018), China's EAP teaching is still in the early development phase and there are no unified teaching materials for the curriculum. This means that teachers do not have the resources to help students improve their academic English skills effectively. Therefore, some educators encourage students to take online courses as an effective way to enhance their academic English skills (Cai, 2015). Online education can certainly benefit learners, especially those from less developed areas of the world (Almahasees et al., 2021). This part will introduce the context of EAP teaching in Chinese higher education and two key issues: the lack of professional EAP teachers and the absence of any systematic teaching materials. It will then look at some practical solutions.

Due to the reform and opening policy in China from the late 1970s, scientific and technical personnel have been given more opportunities to study abroad and take part in international conferences (Cai, 2015). In order to understand the latest research and have more academic exchange, science researchers and students spend time improving their academic English (Ye and Liu, 2013). More recently, the Chinese Ministry of Education instituted the College English Curriculum Requirements and Guidelines for College English Teaching (2015). Those syllabuses propose that English teaching in higher education needs to help students acquire and improve the following abilities: the ability to read and listen to English to understand courses in English medium instruction (EMI) and professional literature; the ability to participate in academic discussions in international conferences after taking EAP courses; and the ability to write and publish papers in English.

In recent years, English teachers have become increasingly aware that the traditional English teaching model cannot fulfill students' needs (Ye and Liu, 2013). As aforementioned, although

some students can get high marks during exams, speak fluently in English, be very knowledgeable about Western culture, they cannot use English very well in professional contexts (Cai, 2015). In view of this, some top universities in China began to organize EAP optional courses to help promote students' ability in academic English (Gao and Bartlett, 2014). In addition, in 2015, China's English for Academic Purposes Association (CEAPA) was founded to give English teachers the opportunity to exchange information and learn from each other, to develop EAP teaching levels in Chinese higher education.

EAP teaching in China is still in the initial stage and because of that, Chinese universities face many challenges promoting it, the most serious being the lack of professional EAP teachers. While the government and the Department of Education should provide more funds to train teachers, universities and students can also take action. For example, universities can encourage students to acquire knowledge of academic English through online courses and use teachers for specific areas. Senior students could help junior students with their academic English (peer learning). Although EAP teaching has not developed very well in China so far, with the effort of the government, universities and teachers, Chinese students will have more chances to acquire higher-quality education in the future (Cai, 2015).

1.3 Research aims and questions

The aim of the research is to identify what kind of support the university and tutors need to provide to improve students' academic writing and enhance their learning experiences in the UK. Thus the study investigates the specific challenges Chinese Postgraduate Taught students face in their academic writing, during their studies in the UK. It also seeks to explore how students experience and overcome the challenges of academic writing in English universities. With these research aims in mind, the following research questions are addressed.

1. What are the academic writing experiences of Chinese Postgraduate Taught students at a UK university?
2. What difficulties do Chinese postgraduate students encounter in their English academic writing?

3. What resources and support do Chinese Postgraduate Taught students expect to get to help them with their academic writing?

1.4 Research rationale and significance

The increasing number of Chinese students in UK Higher Education (UK HE) institutions has been widely recognized (UKCISA, 2018; HESA, 2017 and The Guardian, 2014a). As suggested by HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) (2017), the total number of Chinese students in UK HE institutions rose from 78,715 in 2011/12 to 91,215 in 2015/16. In 2014, almost a quarter of the Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students in the UK were from China (The Guardian, 2014a; Daily Mail, 2014).

There are three key reasons for this significant increase (Quan et al., 2016). To begin with, the economy in mainland China has developed rapidly, especially since the turn of the century when China entered the World Trade Organization. Many more families have become able to afford their children's overseas education. In addition, governmental funds provided to scholars and students to study abroad have also increased (Bodycott, 2009; Zweig *et al.*, 2004). Secondly, English is mandatory from grade 3 in elementary schools to the postgraduate-level in China (Lam, 2002). Thirdly, Chinese students are attracted to the UK due to the opportunities to obtain foreign academic accreditation, English language improvement, cross-cultural experience, and so on (Gu, 2009).

While recruitment of Chinese students in the UK HE can be seen as a success story in terms of quantity, the overall academic attainment of these students lags far behind not just home students but also those from other countries as well (The Guardian, 2014b; Iannelli and Huang, 2014; Ian and Wang, 2015). For instance, Iannelli and Huang (2014) point out that the proportion of Chinese students being awarded a good degree (first or upper-second degree) is lower than that of the UK or other foreign students. One reason for this phenomenon is that academic writing, central to assessment at the postgraduate-level in the UK, has been commonly reported as a frustrating area for Chinese students (Yuan, 2010; Ian and Wang, 2015; Shi, 2006).

The term 'academic writing' here refers to a form of thinking involving students' capabilities of synthesizing ideas and sustaining arguments in writing for academic purposes (Yuan, 2010). Research illustrates that academic writing can be challenging for students whose English is a Second Language because their critical thinking and social and genre knowledge are limited by their language proficiency (Bailey, 2010). In addition, writing in a certain discipline demands an active and thorough engagement with the principles and facts of the discipline (Thonney, 2015). For instance, for students in arts, writing good academic English is one of the most demanding tasks they face during their postgraduate study (Bailey, 2014).

Taking into account the challenges that Chinese students face and my own personal experiences as an international student, this research will explore the challenges in academic writing encountered by Chinese postgraduate taught (PGT) students during their study in the UK. Events from my own past are vital factors that have motivated me to explore this topic. After completing my BA in English literature at a Chinese university, I attended a UK university in order to gain an MA in Education. It took me a long time to acculturate to the educational system. My writing assignments were graded very low and the feedback was invariably that I needed to write more critically.

I noticed that my peers from China experienced similar challenges. The academic tutors did not seem to understand why Chinese students experienced such challenges and provided them with barely any help. This stirred my interest in exploring why and how many Chinese international students were experiencing such challenges in academic writing and what kind of help they needed in order to engage with and complete academic writing tasks. This, together with the limited research on the specific topic of Chinese students' difficulties with English academic writing, motivated me to explore this issue. The focus not just on the challenges but on strategies, means that I am also able to investigate positive experiences, my own and those of others, to illuminate the study and develop ideas for change.

The study explores the experience of Chinese postgraduate taught students, how they overcame the challenges of academic writing in English universities and what kind of support their school could provide in order to improve students' academic writing and enhance their learning

experiences. The thesis also examines the shortcomings of English language teaching in China, exploring the influence of Chinese education on students' English learning. This provides the foundation for suggestions for improvement, to strengthen the English language skills of Chinese students before they go abroad, particularly in terms of English expression and academic English writing.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to improve Chinese students' academic writing in English by generating insights into the difficulties that Chinese Postgraduate Taught students face at a UK university with regard to academic writing. It provides suggestions for developing the academic writing skills of Chinese students that are aimed at the institutions, teachers and individual learners themselves. In addition, the exploratory approach adopted in this study is useful as it employs a variety of methods to explore participants' perceptions in more detail by using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and document analysis, thereby analyzing them both quantitatively and qualitatively. It is hoped that the findings of this study will help Chinese students to improve their English writing skills and enhance their learning effectiveness. In the meantime, it will provide useful data for English language teachers and policymakers in both UK and Chinese universities to guide their decisions on English language teaching and learning, especially academic English.

1.5 Thesis structure

This thesis is structured into ten chapters. This first chapter has provided the background to the study. It has identified the problem, the significance of the research, the research aims and the research questions. Moreover, to familiarise the reader with the Chinese context, this chapter has also provided a general overview of the Chinese educational context and system. In particular, it has described the position of English language teaching at pre-university and university levels in China. As a review of the relevant literature, Chapter 2 is divided into three parts: the first is an overview of research on academic English writing; the second focuses on the difficulties faced by Chinese students in writing English for academic purposes; the third discusses the influencing factors on the development of Chinese students' academic writing and the strategies that students use to address their difficulties.

Chapter 3 is a discussion of some theoretical perspectives and their relevance to current research. The academic literacies approach (Lea and Street, 2006) and the concept of writing as a social practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Street, 2003) are selected as the theoretical frameworks to investigate the experiences and challenges faced by Chinese postgraduate taught (PGT) students in their academic writing.

Chapter 4 provides a description of the methodological framework of this study. The ontological and epistemological perspectives of the researcher and the methods of data collection and analysis are presented. The research design, data collection methods, and analysis procedures are demonstrated as well. Finally, it clarifies the ethical considerations and limitations of this study.

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 provide a discussion of the main findings based on the analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data, relating them to the context of the current study and the relevant literature. The findings are presented according to the research questions proposed earlier.

These chapters are then reviewed in Chapter 9, which further explains the findings in light of the overall research questions. Chapter 10 concludes the thesis by highlighting the contribution of the study and the implications that have arisen. Ways to improve English language education in China are discussed in this chapter as are recommendations for further research and reflections on my doctoral research journey.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature related to English academic writing, with special reference to the background of English teaching in China. This chapter begins with a discussion of the challenges faced by Chinese students in English academic writing. Secondly, it analyzes the factors affecting the development of Chinese students' academic writing, including student-related factors, teaching-related factors and context-related factors. Finally, the gap of existing research is discussed.

Academic writing in the field of education is defined as the style of writing in academic journals, dissertations and master's theses in the field of education and other professional publications in the field of education (Bailey, 2017). Academic writing is essential for students' learning and mastery of relevant subjects. It is a type of creative writing that can be taught to students, which gives them the opportunity and ability to express their ideas in L2. In addition, academic writing can improve students' communication skills, creativity, and self-expression through writing by combining what they have learned with the results of their own independent thinking, which helps to improve their creativity and expression (Hassan, et al., 2020).

Traditional Chinese educational practices are shaped by the culture in which they are embedded, where Chinese students are instructed to imitate and memorize what they have learnt, rather than being encouraged to develop creative and critical thinking skills, their individual voices and opinions. In the context of the current study, it is vital to help Chinese PGT students understand how to write in English as it will help learners to acquire the academic writing skills they need to write critically and express their arguments. This will not only help Chinese students to succeed in their academic courses and examinations, but also help them to produce research and publish papers in the future. At the same time, it is important to avoid students seeing writing as a way to pass exams rather than being interested in writing itself, thereby neglecting the expression of ideas and dialectical thinking that goes into writing. ESL/EFL students have experienced traditional product-centered teaching, where the focus is only on the

teacher's diction and grammatical feedback on the text. Such approaches tend to decontextualize and artificialize writing and do not allow learners to truly understand the purpose of writing for the target audience (Hyland, 2003).

2.2 Academic Writing in a Second Language

Researchers argue that writing is a complex cognitive activity that requires the integration of new knowledge, critical thinking, and reflective abilities (Defazio et al., 2010). With the increasing pace of globalization and internationalisation, universities worldwide have begun to place greater emphasis on strengthening students' English writing competence (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 2014). As a result, research on second language (L2) writing has become more systematic and theoretically grounded. In addition to acquiring basic writing skills, L2 writers must gain sufficient familiarity with the linguistic features of the target language (Randsdell and Barbier, 2002). This includes developing adequate lexical and syntactic resources in order to articulate ideas clearly and accurately. Consequently, writing in a second language requires students not only to possess a certain level of cognitive ability but also to manage the linguistic and rhetorical challenges inherent in using a non-native language.

Within the context of academic writing, many Chinese students encounter considerable difficulties when producing English texts, largely due to their limited familiarity with disciplinary conventions and the expectations of UK higher education (Yang, 2017). Research by Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) demonstrates that differences in referencing practices and contrasting views on the roles of writing in English and Chinese academic cultures may contribute to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety among Chinese students. Similarly, Holmes (2004) notes that insufficient knowledge of English cultural norms and academic practices often compounds the challenges students face, particularly when completing extended written assignments. Gao (2012) further argues that adopting the Western tradition of critical thinking in academic writing can be demanding for Chinese learners because of linguistic, cultural and educational differences. Nonetheless, the success of many Chinese students who develop strong academic writing skills while studying in the UK suggests that targeted writing instruction, consistent writing practice, and active engagement with written corrective feedback can

effectively support students' progress (Han and Hyland, 2015).

2.2.1 Transition Challenges for Chinese Students

The transition from the Chinese educational system to the UK academic environment presents considerable challenges for Chinese students. This process entails more than simply adjusting to a new cultural and social setting; it also requires adapting to unfamiliar academic expectations, norms and conventions. Belcher's (1994) notion of the apprenticeship approach to advanced academic literacy underlines the crucial role of mentorship and guided learning in supporting students as they enter new academic communities. Such an approach is particularly pertinent for Chinese students, who often benefit from structured instructional support when learning to navigate the rhetorical and linguistic demands of English academic writing.

Research has further highlighted the importance of providing academic literacy resources that acknowledge students' cultural backgrounds. Henderson and Whitelaw (2013) argue that resources designed with cultural familiarity in mind can substantially assist Chinese students in interpreting the expectations of Western academic writing and in developing greater confidence as writers. Leung and Safford (2005) similarly note that non-traditional students, including those for whom English is an additional language, frequently face distinctive challenges in higher education. Their findings suggest that these students often require more explicit and sustained academic support to acquire the literacies essential for academic success. Together, these studies indicate that culturally responsive and pedagogically structured support plays a significant role in facilitating Chinese students' transition into the UK academic writing environment.

2.2.2 Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

Plagiarism is a persistent concern in academic writing and poses particular challenges for students writing in a second language. Pecorari (2003) notes that second-language writers may engage in "patchwriting" as a means of coping with the linguistic and cognitive demands of academic composition. Patchwriting—reorganising or minimally altering source texts without

adequate citation—can result in unintentional plagiarism. This tendency is often linked to students' limited understanding of academic conventions and their efforts to produce grammatically accurate and coherent texts under considerable pressure.

Further research by Pecorari and Petrić (2014) highlights that plagiarism among second-language writers frequently stems from unfamiliarity with source use, citation practices and academic expectations rather than deliberate dishonesty. They emphasise the need to teach students how to integrate sources effectively and to support them in developing the interpretive and analytical skills required for responsible academic writing. Building on this, Pecorari (2013) proposes practical instructional strategies designed to prevent plagiarism, underscoring the value of explicit guidance on academic integrity and proper source management.

Zhou et al. (2020) examine first-year students' experiences with academic literacy assessments and demonstrate that formative assessment and timely feedback can enhance students' understanding of academic writing conventions. Their findings suggest that sustained support helps reduce the likelihood of plagiarism by enabling students to gradually develop both academic literacy and confidence. This perspective reinforces the view that academic integrity is best understood as a developmental process that requires continuous scaffolding, rather than as a simple rule-based requirement.

2.3 Chinese Student's Challenges in English Academic Writing

Although Chinese students will have learnt English in China for over 10 years before going to the UK to further their studies (Lam, 2002), this does not necessarily mean that they are competent with the English language. This is because English language teaching and learning in China is examination-oriented, which does not help students truly grasp the essence of the English language (Gao and Watkins, 2002).

Furthermore, Chinese students have limited opportunities to practice writing English during their studies in China. As aforementioned, English teaching in China is examination-oriented. Writing accounts for less than 10% of the total marks and written assignments are invariably

short, between 150 and 250 words for college and university students (Quan et al., 2016). Thus, Chinese students have limited opportunities to understand the essay writing style and requirements of English-speaking universities. This is one reason why Chinese international students in the UK are reported to experience more challenges in adapting to the academic setting and environment than Indo-European students (Quan et al., 2016; Ian and Wang, 2015; Shi, 2006).

As revealed by Su (2010), academic writing is especially challenging for Chinese international students who major in social sciences, arts and the humanities. Students studying in the above disciplinary areas need to spend more time reading the literature and writing essays rather than conducting experiments, thereby being more anxious about writing. However, students studying science, engineering and similar subjects also face challenges in academic writing. Su (2010) identified four key challenges that almost all Chinese international students experience in academic writing while studying in the UK: (i) problems with vocabulary and sentence accuracy; (ii) problems with the rhetorical organization; (iii) problems with English academic writing conventions, and (iv) problems with subject content.

2.3.1 Problems with Vocabulary and Sentence Accuracy

Difficulty in using accurate vocabulary, sentences and correct grammar is a common problem among Chinese international students (Bitchener and Basturkmen, 2006). As noted by Sawir (2005), university tutors identify basic language skills as needing improvement. According to Ye and Liu (2013), one reason may be that in China, teaching focuses on English for general purposes (EGP) rather than academic purposes (EAP), which fails to provide students with sufficient opportunities to acquire and practice academic vocabulary and sentences. Furthermore, insufficient vocabulary is a major obstacle for students trying to improve their English academic writing (Sawir, 2005).

2.3.2 Problems with Rhetorical organization

A substantial body of research suggests that Chinese students tend to employ a more indirect

rhetorical style in their academic writing (Edwards et al., 2007). Within the field of contrastive rhetoric, Kaplan (1966) identifies Chinese writing as being characterised by indirect organization and implicit expression, which stands in contrast to the preference for clarity, linearity and direct argumentation in Western academic contexts. Such rhetorical differences often contribute to challenges for Chinese students when they enter English-medium universities.

Kaplan (1966) attributes this "indirect" rhetorical pattern to the influence of traditional Chinese rhetorical conventions, which value subtle, refined, and implicit expression. He traces these conventions to the classical *ba-gu-wen* (eight-legged essay) structure used in imperial examinations. Although this format was abolished in 1901, its stylistic influence continues to shape the writing practices of some Chinese learners. Building on this perspective, Cai (1993) argues that the segmented, part-for-part structure observed in English essays written by Chinese students parallels features of the *ba-gu-wen*. In contrast, Western academic writing conventions emphasise argumentative clarity and provide writers with greater opportunities to develop critical and analytical perspectives (Mohan and Lo, 1985).

These rhetorical differences may lead to miscommunication when Chinese students compose texts for Western academic audiences, who typically expect explicit claims and direct argumentative progression. Consequently, traditional Chinese rhetorical preferences continue to shape some of the writing difficulties encountered by students in English-speaking universities (Cai, 1993). Edwards et al. (2007) therefore argue that explicit instruction in Western rhetorical norms is essential to help Chinese students strengthen their academic writing skills.

Also, from the perspective of some researchers, the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* structure in the Chinese language also explains why students prefer an indirect writing style (Connor, 1996). "Qi" always introduces the situation rather than explains the thesis statement; "cheng" clarifies the writer's viewpoint and arguments; "Zhuan" is the indirection part of the essay as it always turns to another idea which is not directly connected to the major theme; and the final part, "he", is equivalent to the conclusion part in the western rhetorical style. This model varies from the

Western situation-problem-solution-evaluation schema, leading Mohan and Lo (1985) to conclude that Chinese students' issues with rhetorical organization are associated with their previous writing and learning practices.

In the meantime, though some Chinese students do engage in academic writing during their undergraduate study in China and may be capable of writing in a Western style (Gao and Watkins, 2002), many Chinese are not familiar with the rhetorical organization of English academic writing. It is thus critical to investigate Chinese international students' experience of academic writing and support them to acquire the expected writing skills, thereby improving their learning experiences.

2.3.3 Problems with English Academic Writing Conventions

Chinese students frequently experience difficulties in understanding and applying the conventions that underpin English academic writing. These conventions encompass appropriate citation practices, the structural organisation of essays and research papers, and the formulation of coherent and logically developed arguments. Gu and Brooks (2008) note that Chinese students often struggle with the Western conceptualisation of plagiarism, largely because source use in China differs substantially from practices commonly expected in Western academia. In the Chinese context, incorporating authoritative sources without explicit citation is traditionally viewed as a sign of respect for scholarly authority, whereas in Western academic culture this practice constitutes plagiarism.

Pecorari (2003) further observes that second-language writers, including Chinese students, often resort to patchwriting due to uncertainty about how to integrate sources appropriately. This pattern suggests a broader need for comprehensive instruction in academic integrity, particularly in relation to the skills required for effective source incorporation. Schweisfurth and Gu (2006) similarly argue that unfamiliarity with English academic conventions is a major source of difficulty for Chinese students studying in the UK. Differences in citation purposes and styles between Chinese and English academic writing often create confusion, especially regarding the use of references and the avoidance of plagiarism.

Concerns about plagiarism remain central in Western academic discourse. Bownes (2023) defines plagiarism as attempting to present another person's work as one's own, a practice widely condemned within academic communities. A related issue is self-plagiarism, which occurs when authors reuse substantial portions of their previously published work without proper acknowledgement. In both cases, failing to provide accurate referencing leads to accusations of academic misconduct. Holmes (2004) notes that Chinese international students are sometimes accused of plagiarism in Western universities due to the limited instruction they receive in China on how to avoid it. Some scholars attribute these challenges to differences in cultural traditions and writing practices (Bloch and Chi, 1995; Deckert, 1993). Others argue that universities contribute to the problem by failing to provide explicit and systematic training on citation and referencing practices (Le, 2006).

2.3.4 Problems with Subject Content

Understanding and producing subject-specific content in a second language presents an additional layer of complexity for Chinese students. Hyland (2004) notes that academic disciplines differ considerably in their writing conventions and rhetorical expectations. For example, writing in the humanities often requires critical engagement with texts and theoretical perspectives, whereas scientific writing prioritises empirical evidence, methodological clarity and the presentation of experimental results. Consequently, Chinese students must not only acquire general English language proficiency but also develop an awareness of the disciplinary writing norms that shape scholarly communication within their field of study.

The quality of critical writing is closely linked to students' familiarity with the subject content (Gao, 2012). In addition to challenges related to vocabulary, sentence organisation and linguistic accuracy, critical writing requires a solid understanding of disciplinary knowledge. Students who lack familiarity with the subject matter are unlikely to produce sustained and coherent critical analysis. At the same time, insufficient English proficiency can also undermine critical writing, as students must be able to read and comprehend academic texts critically before they can formulate analytical responses of their own (Edwards and Ran, 2006).

Gao (2012) examined Chinese postgraduate taught students' cross-cultural experiences with English academic writing and selected four participants with writing experience in both Chinese and English from the fields of art and education. By comparing their past writing in Chinese with their current writing in English, the study concludes that limited familiarity with subject-specific content represents the most significant challenge for these students. This finding underscores the importance of disciplinary knowledge as a foundation for effective English academic writing.

Leki and Carson (1994) argue that writing is one of the most critical skills in universities because students need to express their ideas through writing and they are invariably assessed through their performance in writing assignments or papers. Yet despite the increasing number of studies focusing on the challenges students experience in academic writing, there is little research exploring how Chinese international students overcome the challenges during their PGT study and how their schools can better support them in the process. Moreover, it is important for tutors and universities to know and understand the challenges that Chinese PGT students experience in their academic writing as this can lead to the selection of suitable teaching methods to help students improve their writing skills (Schweisfurth and Gu, 2006). This research will therefore investigate the challenges in academic writing faced by Chinese PGT students during their study in the UK, how they overcome these challenges and what kind of support their school can provide to enhance student academic writing during their one-year programme.

2.3.5 Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is another key challenge facing Chinese students in academic writing (Edwards and Ran, 2006; Gao, 2012; Smolska, 2008). Borglin and Fagerström (2012) have stated that the ability to create critical thinking is the fundamental element in academic writing. Difficulties in critical writing are correlated with different perspectives, including cultural value, subject content and English language proficiency. Critical thinking requires people to see both sides of an issue and lay emphasis on the evidence that disconfirms their ideas, constantly reviewing all the evidence and then reaching conclusions (Willingham, 2007). Therefore,

students need to be critical during academic writing (Borglin, 2012). In spite of this, they often find it hard to write critically in the belief in China that published literature is written by experts and is authoritative, which should not be doubted (Smolska 2008).

Tan (2017) pointed out that academic challenges for Chinese students are closely relevant to language issues and cultural barriers, as manifested in academic writing skills. Sit (2013) also expressed similar opinions that Chinese students studying abroad have to cope with the challenges to adjust themselves to the new studying and teaching environment as well as being more active in the way that they learn about new knowledge. Wu and Mok (2017) argue that adaptation difficulties are due to the examination-driven Chinese educational system in which students learn by rote and memorize information without truly understanding the questions or answers or simply following the instructions of teachers. O’Dea and Stern (2022) state that Chinese students who have accepted the Chinese educational system will find it difficult to get used to the British educational system compared to other international students. Concerning the differences in the educational system, Gu (2014) concurs that the Chinese examination-oriented educational environment nurtures rote education and prioritizes high scores over students’ creativity and critical thinking.

On the contrary, the western educational system pays much more attention to fostering students’ creativity and ability to address issues independently. In the UK, teaching and learning approaches are basically student-centered. As O’Dea (2020) said, extended written assignments require coherence and critical thinking to display students’ in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the subjects they learn, with the ability to use logical proof and evidence-oriented arguments. From his perspective, vocabulary and sentence accuracy, rhetorical organization, academic writing conventions and choices of subject areas can be concluded as formalized skills needed to construct academic writing, while critical thinking and analytical writing are the key factors determining the direction and depth of an essay.

Additionally, as suggested by Elder and Paul (2016), critical thinking plays a significant role in creating serious thoughts and in-depth views and should be embodied in academic writing. They argue that well-educated people usually have clear, accurate logic and profound writing

abilities. In other words, critical thinking is seen as a critical yardstick to determine the level of professionalism in academic writing.

2.3.6 Using Sources and Plagiarism

A considerable body of research identifies plagiarism as a significant issue in the written work of Chinese students (Ehrich et al., 2016). Within Western educational systems, copying material without appropriate citation is regarded as a serious academic offence, often accompanied by severe consequences for students (Gullifer and Tyson, 2010). Pecorari (2003) acknowledges that Chinese students may display textual features resembling plagiarism in their academic writing; however, these features do not necessarily indicate an intention to violate academic norms. Instead, Pecorari characterises such behaviour as “patchwriting,” a developmental stage in which novice writers rely heavily on the language and structure of source texts. Unlike deliberate plagiarism, patchwriting lacks deceptive intent and is regarded as a transitional phase in the process of learning to write in an additional language.

Catterall and Ireland (2010) further observe that postgraduate taught (PGT) Chinese students often experience considerable pressure to improve their English academic writing within a short period in order to meet university expectations. Hu et al. (2016) add that Chinese students may struggle to fully understand assignment briefs, marking criteria and tutors’ written feedback, which can hinder their ability to make targeted improvements. These challenges highlight the difficulty Chinese students face in accessing effective academic writing support and underscore the need for clearer guidance and more structured instructional interventions.

According to Cottrell (2013) and Northedge (2005), a key reason Chinese students are vulnerable to plagiarism is their limited development of autonomous learning skills in academic writing. Loh and Teo (2017) similarly observe that Chinese students often lack sufficient autonomy in their learning processes. This challenge becomes particularly acute when students undertake a dissertation, a task that requires high levels of independent decision-making in selecting topics, designing research methods, and determining the structure and content of their work.

In addition, Osmond and Tovey (2015) argue that students must first acquire a foundational level of disciplinary knowledge before they can be expected to understand academic referencing conventions and use textual and visual materials appropriately in their assignments. Pecorari (2013) further contends that educators must themselves understand the complexities of plagiarism in order to effectively guide students toward sound academic practices. Bailey (2017) suggests that effective strategies for helping students avoid plagiarism include developing efficient note-taking skills, learning to analyse sources critically, and formulating independent arguments.

Beyond these skills, Chinese international students also need to develop proficiency in paraphrasing and summarising, avoid direct copying, and make appropriate use of citation management tools as well as plagiarism detection software to check for similarity in their manuscripts. Together, these competencies contribute to building the academic autonomy required to meet the expectations of Western academic writing.

Regarding the challenges and difficulties Chinese students face in English academic writing, researchers have tended to focus on finding out and analyzing specific challenges that Chinese students face. Few researchers combine the different challenges and difficulties Chinese PGT students experience within their academic writing at UK universities. For instance, Kaplan (1966), Cai (1993) and Kirkpatrick (1997) focused on how traditional Chinese text structures influence the writing in English of Chinese students. Similarly, Bloch and Chi (1995), Deckert (1992), Schweisfurth and Gu (2006) and Holmes (2004) paid attention to students' problems with English academic writing conventions. Researchers have also investigated the reasons behind plagiarism and how to help students avoid plagiarism in their academic writing.

While they have explored students' difficulties and challenges in different ways, few studies integrate students' challenges in their academic writing with strategies to help students improve their writing. Some researchers have combined the challenges faced by English as a second language (ESL) academic writers to summarise the different difficulties they face in higher education (Tang 2012). However, there is a lack of research that focuses exclusively on Chinese international students and in particular, Chinese PGT students studying in the UK.

Consequently, this research will attempt to fill this gap by investigating Chinese PGT students' challenges in academic writing in the UK and identify how to help these students improve their academic writing skills step by step.

2.3.7 Peer and Tutor Support

Feedback from peers and teachers can provide much value for second language learners, especially in writing (Evans et al., 2010). Conversely, inappropriate feedback and comments may result in students' frustration with academic writing. In other words, teachers' constructive feedback can bring about better outcomes in academic writing. According to Farrah (2012), feedback from peers can also positively affect learners' writing. Jahin (2012) also found that peer reviewing could inspire learners to provide multiple views in the process of their writing. Many studies have shown the positive impact of peer reviewing in improving learners' academic work. As the number of Chinese students continues to grow and their academic and financial contribution to the UK universities rises, it is vital that the difficulties faced by Chinese students are better understood so that further support can be provided to enhance their academic experience in the UK.

2.4 Factors Affecting Chinese Students' Academic Writing Development

The development of Chinese students' academic writing skills is shaped by multiple interrelated factors. These may be broadly classified into student-related, teaching-related, and context-related influences. Understanding how these factors interact provides important insights into the challenges Chinese students face and the types of support that may facilitate their academic writing development.

2.4.1 Student-Related Factors

Students' motivation and attitudes toward learning English play a crucial role in shaping their academic writing development. Gardner (1985) distinguishes between integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation reflects a genuine interest in engaging with the language and its associated cultural community, whereas instrumental motivation arises from

practical goals such as passing examinations or enhancing career opportunities. Research suggests that students with stronger integrative motivation tend to achieve higher levels of proficiency in language learning, including academic writing competence (Zoltán and Dörnyei, 2001).

Chinese students' previous learning experiences also exert a strong influence on their academic writing abilities. As discussed earlier, the Chinese education system has traditionally placed considerable emphasis on rote memorization and repetition. While effective for certain types of learning, this approach does not adequately prepare students for the critical thinking, argumentation, and analytical skills required in Western academic writing. Consequently, students may struggle to formulate original arguments or engage critically with texts, limiting their overall academic writing performance (Tian and Low, 2011).

2.4.2 Teaching-Related Factors

Teaching methods employed in English language instruction significantly affect students' writing development. Traditional product-oriented approaches, which prioritise the final written text over the writing process, have been criticised for failing to cultivate deeper writing skills (Hyland, 2003). In contrast, process-oriented pedagogies—which emphasise drafting, peer and teacher feedback, and iterative revision—have been shown to support more meaningful writing development and lead to improved writing outcomes (Ferris, 2003).

Teacher feedback constitutes a central component of effective writing instruction. Ferris (2003) distinguishes between direct and indirect feedback and highlights the importance of addressing different dimensions of writing, including grammar, content, organisation and argumentation. High-quality feedback enables students to recognise their errors, understand the underlying issues, and develop the skills needed to make appropriate revisions, thereby fostering long-term improvement in writing proficiency.

2.4.3 Context-Related Factors

Cultural differences between Chinese and Western educational traditions also influence

academic writing development. As discussed previously, Chinese rhetorical practices often value indirectness and implicit communication, whereas Western academic writing prioritises clarity, directness and explicit argumentation (Kaplan, 1966). For Chinese students studying in Western academic contexts, developing an awareness of these cultural differences and learning how to adapt their writing accordingly is essential.

The academic environment in which Chinese students study further shapes their writing development. Supportive learning environments that provide access to resources such as writing centres, tutoring services and academic workshops can help students strengthen their writing skills. Murray and Nallaya (2014) also emphasise the value of peer support and collaborative learning, which can promote confidence, encourage practice, and create a positive atmosphere for writing development.

2.5 Academic Writing and Culture Shock of Chinese Students

Transition within an academic setting refers to the process through which students adapt from a familiar cultural and educational context to a new academic and sociocultural environment. This process typically involves adjusting to new academic norms, linguistic expectations and writing conventions, as well as navigating cultural differences and the challenges of everyday life (Sharma, 2013). Campbell and Li (2008) argue that Chinese students often experience multiple and overlapping challenges when studying, working and living in an unfamiliar culture. These challenges are intensified by the need to acquire a new language and adapt to unfamiliar forms of interaction with peers and academic staff. When Chinese students conceptualise academic literacy too narrowly during this transition, they may also overlook opportunities to draw on their existing strengths and competencies (Leung and Safford, 2005).

To support Chinese postgraduate students in their transition into UK higher education, universities have implemented a variety of policies and measures. Belcher (1994) suggests that the establishment of effective tutorial systems, the encouragement of interdisciplinary collaboration and the provision of comprehensive academic and pastoral support are key strategies that can help Chinese students adjust more successfully to new academic and cultural

expectations. Henderson and Whitelaw (2013) further propose that culturally relevant multimedia e-learning resources can enhance first-year students' understanding of academic literacy—including critical thinking, citation practices and academic integrity—thereby fostering academic development and reducing the likelihood of academic misconduct.

Despite these initiatives, many Chinese students continue to face difficulties adapting to the academic environment in the UK. Their challenges extend beyond academic writing alone and include adjusting to new teaching and learning methods, unfamiliar classroom interaction norms and a culturally diverse academic community. Consequently, the combined demands of linguistic adjustment, cultural adaptation and academic transition contribute to the complexity of Chinese students' experiences as they learn to navigate UK academic writing expectations.

Gilbert (2000) pointed out that Chinese international students generally suffer from academic culture shock, a subset of culture shock which refers to " the inconsistency between the higher education models of students in their home and host countries" (p.14). It is directly related to the learning environment in academic institutions, including the unfamiliar learning styles and assessment methods that students need to engage with. As a result, the main challenges of many students in academic writing involve poor use of the English language, difficulties in finding appropriate references and books, and a lack of guidance from schools and teachers (Ankawi, 2015). Tian and Lowe (2013) also identify the different academic writing requirements and assessment standards between the Chinese and UK universities as contributing to the academic culture shock faced by Chinese postgraduate students in the UK. This negatively impacts their experience of academic English writing and the quality of their work.

The educational models that students will encounter at their Chinese university will differ from the academic culture that pervades UK universities. Chinese teachers of English mainly conduct lectures. Students are encouraged to remember what they have learnt rather than stimulating them to think critically and to understand and apply the language they have learnt. Chinese teachers thus pass on what they have learnt to their students and do not encourage discussion or questioning in the classroom. Freire (1970) referred to this as the banking model of education, meaning that the more students struggle to store the deposits entrusted to them, the less they

develop the critical consciousness that may arise from their intervention in the world as its transformers. The more fully they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend to simply adapt to the world as it is and the fragmented view of reality deposited in them. It follows that in China, tutors supervise students very closely and provide them with a lot of guidance on academic matters, which leads to Chinese students lacking the ability to learn and think independently and being less motivated to learn, thereby adversely affecting their academic writing skills.

In addition, many researchers have found that Chinese students' mindset is impacted by the philosophy of Confucius. For example, they generally avoid criticizing their peers' writing or questioning their peers in discussions (Carson and Nelson, 1996). Similarly, Durkin (2011) argued that in debates, Chinese students tend to listen to other participants' opinions and avoid questioning and rebuttals.

In addition, the individualistic identity that they encounter in the UK is a relatively foreign concept to Chinese students who have grown up in a culture that values the collective, relational sense of self-identity, and questioning and criticizing can be perceived as disrespectful or impolite. Secondly, studies reveal that there is a strict power relationship between Chinese students and their teachers, with the former being taught not to challenge the latter. This means that Chinese students are more likely to seek help from their peers than to ask or consult their teachers directly during their studies in the UK. Nevertheless, research in recent years has also pointed out that with the development of China, contemporary Chinese students are also influenced by Western ideas from an early age, which makes many of them able to think critically and independently and express their own views and opinions (Dervin and Simpson, 2021). This indicates the necessity for further exploring the academic culture shock faced by contemporary Chinese students in the UK.

Although many studies have demonstrated that Chinese students face challenges in the UK, their needs and struggles continue to be overlooked. There is also limited research on Chinese postgraduate students' experiences of writing in the UK, particularly how they overcome their difficulties in various areas to develop their academic writing. In this sense, therefore, more

research is needed.

2.6 Gaps in Existing Research

Although considerable research has examined the challenges Chinese students face in English academic writing, important gaps remain. For example, further investigation is needed into the specific pedagogical strategies that can effectively support Chinese students as they transition to Western academic writing conventions. Moreover, the field lacks longitudinal research that follows students over extended periods, which would allow for a deeper understanding of how their academic writing skills develop and the factors that most significantly influence their progress.

2.6.1 Need for Longitudinal Studies

Longitudinal studies can offer valuable insights into the developmental trajectories of Chinese students' academic writing abilities and the long-term effects of different instructional interventions. Such research can help identify which teaching methods, feedback practices and support structures most effectively facilitate students' adaptation to Western academic writing norms. Tracking students' progress from their first year through later stages of study could reveal common patterns, pivotal moments and key challenges in their writing development.

2.6.2 Specific Interventions and Strategies

There is also a need for more detailed research on targeted interventions and pedagogical strategies that support Chinese students in improving their academic writing. While existing studies have outlined major challenges and offered general recommendations, research on concrete, actionable practices remains limited. Future studies should focus on examining specific instructional approaches, feedback mechanisms and academic writing support programmes to determine which are most effective in addressing particular writing difficulties.

2.6.3 Impact of Digital Tools and Online Resources

As digital tools and online resources become increasingly integrated into higher education, their

role in academic writing development warrants further investigation. Tools such as grammar checkers, plagiarism detection software and online writing platforms may significantly influence students' writing practices. Research should explore how Chinese students employ these digital resources and evaluate their effectiveness in enhancing writing accuracy, coherence and academic integrity.

2.6.4 Cross-Disciplinary Differences

Finally, further research is needed to examine cross-disciplinary differences in the academic writing challenges experienced by Chinese students. Because writing conventions vary across disciplines, students in fields such as the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences may encounter distinct types of difficulties. Discipline-specific studies could yield more nuanced insights and lead to more tailored instructional strategies for both educators and students.

2.7 Summary

This literature review has examined the range of challenges Chinese students encounter in English academic writing and the factors that shape their writing development. The transition from the Chinese educational system to a Western academic context introduces substantial difficulties, particularly in relation to vocabulary and grammatical accuracy, rhetorical organisation, academic writing conventions and the understanding of subject-specific content.

Multiple influences—including student motivation and attitudes, prior learning experiences, teaching methods, teacher feedback, cultural differences and the broader academic environment—contribute to the complexity of Chinese students' academic writing development. Although significant research has explored these issues, important gaps remain. In particular, further work is needed in the areas of longitudinal research, targeted interventions, the role of digital tools and cross-disciplinary perspectives on academic writing challenges.

Addressing these gaps through future research would provide deeper insights and more practical guidance for educators and policymakers seeking to support Chinese students in developing their academic writing proficiency. A more nuanced understanding of the specific

challenges these students face will enable the design of more effective instructional approaches, helping Chinese students achieve greater academic success and supporting their broader academic and professional development.

Chapter 3 Conceptual Framework

3.1 Introduction

As demonstrated in the preceding literature review, existing studies have examined the academic writing of Chinese postgraduate taught (PGT) students from multiple perspectives (Han and Hyland, 2015). However, further research is needed to deepen our understanding of students' own perspectives and lived experiences of academic writing. This chapter introduces the conceptual framework that informs the analysis of the present study, drawing on academic literacies literature to provide a critical discussion of identity, power and the social dimensions of academic writing.

The academic literacies approach (Lea and Street, 2006), together with the conceptualisation of writing as a social practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Street, 2003), serves as the overarching theoretical framework for examining the academic writing experiences of Chinese PGT students. This framework enables an exploration of how universities and tutors might more effectively support students' writing development throughout their studies.

Both academic literacies theory and social practice theory share the view that writing is a socially and culturally situated activity. From a sociocultural perspective, human action is mediated through the use of cultural, physical and symbolic tools that shape individuals' interactions with others and with themselves (Lantolf, 2000). This study adopts this perspective as the conceptual foundation for understanding academic writing as a social practice. Such a lens allows for a more nuanced interpretation of how Chinese PGT students negotiate academic writing expectations within a sociocultural tradition. Through the academic literacies framework, this study aims to illuminate the social, cultural and identity-related challenges these students encounter and to provide insights into how their academic writing experiences can be better supported.

3.2 Academic Literacies Theory

Academic literacies theory emphasises the importance of understanding writing as a socially and culturally situated practice rather than a purely technical skill set (Lea and Street, 2006; Lillis, 2014). This approach foregrounds the wider institutional and sociocultural contexts in which writing takes place, including issues of identity, power and social relations. According to Lea and Street (2006), academic literacies encompass the multiple literacies that students bring with them to university, as well as the different expectations and disciplinary conventions they encounter. This perspective shifts attention from writing as a product to writing as an embedded practice shaped by social, cultural and institutional contexts.

3.2.1 Identity and Power in Academic Writing

A central contribution of the academic literacies approach is its focus on identity and power in academic writing. Ivanič (1998) argues that writing functions as a means through which students construct, negotiate and present their identities. For Chinese PGT students, this involves managing their identities as non-native English speakers while navigating the expectations of a new academic culture. The academic literacies framework provides insight into how these identities are shaped through writing practices and how students negotiate the power relations inherent in academic discourse.

Blommaert et al. (2007) further highlight the significance of examining power relations that structure academic writing. Such power dynamics influence how students' writing is interpreted, judged and valued, often privileging dominant linguistic and cultural norms. This is particularly relevant for Chinese PGT students, who may struggle to align their writing with the expectations of UK academic institutions. Understanding these power relations is essential for developing more equitable and supportive writing pedagogies that acknowledge and validate the diverse literacies students bring to higher education.

3.2.2 Social Practices and Academic Writing

Social practice theory, articulated by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Street (2003), offers a

valuable lens for examining academic writing as a socially situated activity. The theory asserts that learning and writing occur within specific social, cultural and institutional contexts. For Chinese PGT students, academic writing entails engaging with new social practices and learning to navigate the norms and expectations of their academic communities.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation describes how newcomers gradually transition from peripheral to fuller participation within a community of practice. This concept is particularly useful in understanding the trajectory Chinese PGT students follow as they learn to participate more confidently and competently in the academic writing practices of their programmes. Through interactions with peers, tutors and academic texts, students incrementally gain access to the tacit knowledge and conventions that underpin disciplinary writing.

Street's (2003) conceptualisation of literacy as a social practice further underscores that writing is not simply a cognitive process or text-production activity. Instead, it is embedded in broader social interactions and cultural norms. This perspective highlights how Chinese PGT students' writing practices are shaped by their engagement with academic discourses, classroom practices and institutional expectations. It also demonstrates the importance of analysing academic writing within its sociocultural context rather than reducing it to an individual cognitive skill.

3.3 Application of Academic Literacies Theory to Chinese PGT Students' Writing

Applying the academic literacies approach to the study of Chinese PGT students' writing involves examining how these students navigate the social, cultural and institutional expectations embedded in academic writing within UK universities. This section explores how issues of identity and power shape their writing practices and how they engage with the writing demands of their programmes.

3.3.1 Navigating Identity in Academic Writing

For Chinese PGT students, writing in a UK academic context often requires negotiating their

identities as non-native English speakers and newcomers to a different academic culture. Ivanič (1998) argues that writing serves as a medium through which individuals construct, assert and negotiate their identities. For these students, academic writing involves not only fulfilling technical and disciplinary requirements but also presenting themselves as legitimate and competent members of their academic communities.

Lea (1999) and Turner (2010) emphasise that students' identity construction in writing is shaped by their previous educational experiences and cultural backgrounds. Chinese PGT students may bring different expectations, rhetorical norms and writing conventions, which influence how they engage with academic texts and assignments. Recognising these identity-related challenges is essential for supporting students as they develop their academic writing competence.

3.3.2 Power Dynamics in Academic Writing

Power dynamics constitute a central aspect of the academic writing experiences of Chinese PGT students. As Blommaert et al. (2007) and Lillis and Tuck (2016) argue, academic writing is embedded within institutional power relations that privilege particular linguistic and cultural norms. For Chinese PGT students, this means navigating an evaluative environment in which their writing is often measured against the standards of native English speakers and the conventions of UK academia.

Lea and Street (2006) contend that recognising these power dynamics is a prerequisite for developing more inclusive and equitable writing pedagogies. By valuing the diverse literacies students bring with them, educators can move beyond a deficit perspective—one that views non-native English writers as inherently lacking—and adopt a more supportive approach that acknowledges both students' strengths and the challenges they encounter.

3.3.3 Academic Literacies and Institutional Support

The academic literacies framework also highlights the importance of institutional support in helping students navigate academic writing demands. Wingate (2018) argues that collaborative

instructional approaches that involve both subject specialists and language experts can provide more holistic support for students' writing development. This approach recognises that academic writing is deeply embedded in disciplinary practices and cannot be effectively taught in isolation.

Lea (2004) suggests that embedding academic literacies into curriculum design—by structuring assignments and writing tasks that explicitly address the social and cultural dimensions of academic writing—creates more supportive learning environments. Such integration provides opportunities for students to reflect on their writing practices and engage more deeply with disciplinary expectations, thereby fostering greater confidence and competence.

3.3.4 Examples from Research

Several studies apply the academic literacies approach to investigate the writing experiences of international students, including Chinese PGT writers. Wingate and Tribble (2012), for example, propose a model that combines English for Academic Purposes (EAP) with academic literacies concepts. This integrated model addresses both the linguistic and sociocultural dimensions of writing and offers a comprehensive framework for instructional support.

Lillis (2014) demonstrates how academic literacies can illuminate the writing practices of non-native English speakers in higher education. By foregrounding the social and cultural contexts of writing, this approach provides insights into the strategies students use to navigate academic expectations. This is particularly relevant for Chinese PGT students, who often face distinct linguistic, cultural and rhetorical challenges in adapting to UK academic writing norms.

3.3.5 Strategies for Navigating Academic Writing

Chinese PGT students employ a range of strategies to manage the challenges of academic writing in the UK. These include seeking feedback from tutors and peers, accessing writing support services, and engaging extensively with academic reading to familiarise themselves with disciplinary conventions. The academic literacies perspective recognises these practices as legitimate forms of engagement rather than remedial behaviours.

Studies by Hyland (2013) and Zhang (2016) highlight the central role of feedback in writing development. For Chinese PGT students, tutor and peer feedback provides essential guidance for improving writing quality and aligning with disciplinary expectations. Writing support services, such as writing centres and skill workshops, also play an important role in supporting these students' learning.

Extensive reading is another key strategy. By engaging with a broad range of academic texts, Chinese PGT students gain deeper insights into disciplinary discourses and rhetorical norms. This helps them develop greater familiarity with academic language and supports the emergence of their own academic voice.

3.3.6 Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the challenges Chinese PGT students face in adapting to the academic writing conventions of UK universities, the academic literacies approach emphasises the opportunities for growth that arise from their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This perspective encourages educators to adopt more inclusive and supportive writing pedagogies that value these students' prior knowledge and experiences. By recognising both the difficulties and the strengths that Chinese PGT students bring, institutions can create learning environments that foster academic success and personal development.

3.4 The Role of Tutors and Peers

The role of tutors and peers is central to supporting the academic writing development of Chinese PGT students. This section examines how effective feedback, collaborative learning and mentoring contribute to facilitating these students' engagement with academic writing and enhancing their writing competence.

3.4.1 Effective Feedback

Effective feedback is essential for helping students recognise their strengths and identify areas for improvement. Hyland and Hyland (2006) emphasise that feedback should be clear,

constructive and attentive to both content and linguistic form. For Chinese PGT students, who may encounter language-related challenges and unfamiliar academic conventions, detailed and explicit feedback serves as a critical source of guidance.

Research by Goldstein (2004) and Ferris (2010) suggests that feedback should go beyond marking errors by offering concrete suggestions and strategies for improvement. Such an approach encourages students to actively engage with feedback, apply it meaningfully to their writing and develop self-regulatory skills. Moreover, feedback that acknowledges students' progress and effort can strengthen confidence and increase motivation, both of which are essential for sustained writing development.

3.4.2 Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning represents another effective means of supporting academic writing development. Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice highlights the value of social interaction in learning processes. Through participation in peer review sessions, writing groups and collaborative projects, Chinese PGT students can exchange perspectives, gain exposure to diverse writing strategies and learn from one another's experiences.

Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) further illustrates the benefits of collaborative learning. Within the ZPD, students can perform tasks with assistance from more experienced peers or tutors that they would be unable to accomplish independently. Such collaborative engagement fosters a supportive learning environment in which students can develop writing proficiency through interaction, negotiation of meaning and shared problem-solving.

3.4.3 Mentoring and Support

Mentoring programmes provide personalised and sustained support for Chinese PGT students as they navigate academic writing challenges. Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) argue that mentors can offer guidance on both the academic and cultural dimensions of writing, helping students understand new expectations and adapt to unfamiliar academic norms. In addition to

academic guidance, mentoring relationships often provide emotional support, helping students manage stress and build confidence during the writing process.

Andrade (2006) highlights the effectiveness of mentoring schemes that pair international students with experienced peers or faculty members. Such programmes can offer regular feedback, tailored advice and encouragement, creating a more inclusive learning environment and promoting students' academic writing development.

3.5 The Influence of Cultural Backgrounds

Understanding how cultural backgrounds influence academic writing is essential for supporting Chinese PGT students as they adapt to the expectations of UK higher education. This section examines the role of cultural factors in shaping writing practices and discusses how educators can respond to these influences through inclusive and culturally informed pedagogical approaches

3.5.1 Cultural Conventions in Writing

Chinese students often draw upon cultural writing conventions that differ significantly from those commonly expected in Western academic contexts. These differences can affect their approaches to textual organisation, argumentation and citation practices. Kaplan's (1966) contrastive rhetoric theory highlights that writing styles are culturally situated, and such variations shape how students formulate and present their ideas.

For instance, traditional Chinese writing has been associated with a preference for indirectness, circular development and implicit argumentation. These rhetorical tendencies may contrast with the linear, explicit and thesis-driven structure typically valued in Western academic writing. Recognising these cultural influences enables educators to better understand the rhetorical challenges Chinese PGT students might face and to offer more tailored forms of academic writing support.

3.5.2 Addressing Cultural Differences

Addressing cultural differences in academic writing requires the development of inclusive curricula that acknowledge and value diverse rhetorical traditions. Canagarajah (2002) advocates a pedagogical approach that embraces multilingualism and cross-cultural communication, encouraging students to make meaningful use of their linguistic and cultural repertoires in academic writing.

Educators can incorporate comparative writing activities that prompt students to explore similarities and differences across rhetorical traditions. Such discussions help students understand the strengths, functions and contextual appropriateness of various writing conventions. Through this process, students can develop greater rhetorical flexibility and a more adaptive approach to academic writing. This not only supports Chinese PGT students but also enriches the overall learning experience for multinational student cohorts.

3.6 Institutional Policies and Practices

Institutional policies and practices play a crucial role in shaping the academic writing experiences of Chinese PGT students. This section examines how universities can develop policies and pedagogical practices that more effectively support these students' writing development.

3.6.1 Integrating Writing Support into the Curriculum

Integrating writing support into the curriculum involves designing courses and assessments that explicitly address academic writing skills. Wingate (2018) argues that embedding writing instruction within disciplinary modules—rather than treating writing as an isolated skill—provides more meaningful and contextually relevant support.

Course designs that incorporate writing workshops, peer review activities and scaffolded assignments help students progressively build their writing competence. For Chinese PGT students, this integrated approach can offer sustained guidance and multiple opportunities for

practice, thereby making the writing process more accessible and less overwhelming.

3.6.2 Providing Access to Writing Resources

Universities should ensure that students have access to a wide range of writing support resources, including writing centres, online tutorials and academic support services. Writing centres can offer one-to-one consultations, targeted workshops and discipline-specific guidance tailored to the needs of Chinese PGT students. North (1984) emphasises that writing centres should aim to foster independent writers by supporting students' development rather than simply correcting errors.

Online resources—such as writing guides, video tutorials and discussion forums—also provide flexible, self-paced support. These tools can address various aspects of academic writing, including grammar, academic style, argument structure and referencing techniques, making them especially useful for students adjusting to new academic expectations.

3.6.3 Training for Tutors and Faculty

Training for tutors and faculty is essential to equip staff with the skills and awareness necessary to support Chinese PGT students effectively. Carless (2006) argues that professional development should include training on cultural sensitivity, effective feedback strategies and the principles underpinning the academic literacies approach.

Faculty should be aware of the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students and understand how these factors shape writing practices. Training can also focus on strategies for offering constructive, supportive feedback, recognising the challenges faced by non-native English writers and creating inclusive learning environments where all students can thrive.

3.6.4 Policy Development

Institutional policies should reflect a clear commitment to supporting the academic writing development of all students, including international cohorts. Such policies might include embedding writing support within the curriculum, allocating sustainable funding for writing

centres and establishing structured mentoring or peer-support programmes.

Policies should also prioritise inclusivity and diversity in academic writing. This involves recognising and valuing different linguistic and cultural perspectives, and promoting pedagogical practices that support multilingual and multicultural student populations. Such inclusive policies help foster academic environments where Chinese PGT students—and all learners—can contribute, participate and succeed.

3.7 Summary

The conceptual framework grounded in academic literacies and social practice theory offers a comprehensive lens through which to understand the academic writing experiences of Chinese PGT students. By conceptualising writing as a socially and culturally situated practice, this framework foregrounds the significance of identity negotiation, power relations and cultural influences in shaping students' engagement with academic writing.

The framework also highlights the pivotal role of educational support—particularly effective feedback, collaborative learning, mentoring and inclusive curriculum design—in helping Chinese PGT students navigate the demands of academic writing. Institutional policies and practices that embed writing support within disciplinary curricula, expand access to writing resources and ensure appropriate training for faculty and tutors are critical for fostering a supportive learning environment.

In conclusion, the academic literacies approach provides valuable insights and actionable strategies for improving the academic writing experiences of Chinese PGT students. By recognising the diversity of students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds and responding to their varied needs, universities can promote more equitable, inclusive and empowering academic environments that better support students' writing development and overall academic success.

Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology and methods employed to address the research questions by presenting the overall research design, the data collection procedures and the analytical strategies adopted in the study. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach that included surveys, semi-structured interviews and an analysis of students' written assignments, the chapter first introduces the research design and then details the processes used to develop the questionnaire, construct the interview protocol and design the research instruments. It subsequently explains the procedures for data analysis and discusses the measures taken to ensure reliability and validity. Finally, the chapter reflects on the practical issues encountered during fieldwork and outlines the ethical considerations relevant to the conduct of this study.

4.2 Research Design

Creswell (2010) suggests that the extent to which a study requires “interpretation” or “exploration” helps determine whether quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods are most appropriate. While early scholarship often positioned quantitative and qualitative approaches as separate paradigms, later theorists such as Guba and Lincoln (1989) have argued for the potential benefits of combining the two. More recently, mixed methods research has developed into a distinct paradigm characterised by a systematic procedure for collecting, analysing and integrating both quantitative and qualitative data within a single study or across multiple studies (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011).

Mixed methods designs are now widely used in social science research (Creswell, 2003). Such designs involve gathering data concurrently or sequentially through qualitative and quantitative methods and integrating the results across different stages of the project. Creswell (2007) argues that combining the two approaches provides a more comprehensive understanding of a research problem than either method alone. This complementarity allows researchers to capture different dimensions of a phenomenon, resulting in a richer and more robust account (Greene et al., 1989;

Miles and Huberman, 1994). Dornyei (2007) and Cohen (2011) similarly emphasise that mixed methods allow researchers to investigate human behaviour from multiple vantage points. Because mixed methods generate insights through different modes of inquiry, the breadth and depth of findings can offset the limitations inherent in any single method (Giddings and Grant, 2007). Complex research questions thus benefit from methodological integration, as answers cannot be fully captured through quantitative data alone or qualitative narratives alone (Creswell and Clark, 2007).

Quantitative approaches have frequently been used to investigate English language learners' academic writing experiences. For example, quantitative measures have assessed students' perceived burden in academic writing (Hanauer and Englander, 2011), critical thinking skills (Huang, 2010; McLaughlin and Moore, 2012; Melles, 2009), and academic writing performance (Alagozlu, 2007; Fahim et al., 2010; Helms-Park and Stapleton, 2003). Survey-based designs in particular enable the inclusion of large sample sizes, thereby capturing general patterns in the writing experiences of Chinese postgraduate taught (PGT) students and identifying core challenges they face.

Qualitative research, by contrast, enables researchers to investigate phenomena in greater depth and without predetermined analytic categories. As Patton (1990) notes, qualitative inquiry produces rich, detailed accounts that illuminate complex aspects of participants' experiences. The interpretive nature of qualitative thematic analysis allows researchers to connect individual accounts to broader conceptual issues and extend their findings beyond the immediate context (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). In addition, qualitative research promotes transparency regarding researcher positionality, helping ensure that findings are not predetermined or biased by assumptions of neutrality (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). This stands in contrast to quantitative paradigms that often assume objectivity and understate the influence of researcher interpretation.

Given the aims of this study—to explore how Chinese PGT students navigate their academic writing experiences in UK universities and how they respond constructively to the challenges they encounter—a mixed methods design was adopted. Quantitative data, collected through

questionnaires, was used to capture students' perceptions of academic writing and the difficulties they face. Qualitative data, generated through semi-structured interviews and analyses of students' assignments, provided deeper insights into their writing goals, interpretations of academic writing, relationships with writing and the ways in which they develop their writing skills through tutors' feedback.

4.2.1 Research Site and Participants

This study was conducted with a sample of students enrolled in MA programmes at a university in the United Kingdom. The choice of research site was primarily informed by accessibility and feasibility: the university was geographically convenient, allowing for regular visits during data collection, and my existing contacts provided familiarity and ease of access to potential participants. Newly enrolled international students at this institution are offered a pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme designed to prepare them for postgraduate study, as well as a range of in-sessional EAP courses that support their academic work throughout their degree. In order to examine Chinese students' academic writing experiences during their studies in the UK, I aimed to track their writing development from their initial exposure to academic practices at the university. This approach enabled me not only to interact with students as they entered a new academic community but also to gain deeper insight into the academic practices and expectations of the institution.

The participants in this study were Chinese students who had completed their undergraduate degrees in China and were enrolled in postgraduate taught (PGT) programmes at the time of the fieldwork. I deliberately recruited participants from two departments—Education and Business—to capture a broader range of writing experiences. Data was collected from two cohorts of students, enrolled in 2018 and 2019. Survey responses revealed several shared characteristics among the participants: they were all in their twenties or thirties, had received their primary and secondary education in China and had completed their first degrees at Chinese universities. None had previously studied abroad in a formal academic setting. All participants had taken the IELTS examination in China, and 23 of the 30 surveyed students had completed the Academic English for Postgraduate Studies preparatory courses offered by the university's

Language Centre. These courses aim to develop key academic English skills such as essay writing, note-taking and oral presentations. All surveyed students had also taken part in various in-sessional EAP courses provided by the university during their postgraduate study.

Prior to the first round of data collection, I conducted a pilot study, after which I decided to recruit students from the Business and Education departments. A total of 160 questionnaires were distributed to the 2018 cohort, and 104 were returned. Among these respondents, 24 students indicated their willingness to participate in interviews, and semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted with them (see Table 4.1). During data analysis, I found that interviews alone did not sufficiently address the research questions, particularly with regard to understanding the specific writing difficulties students encountered. Therefore, in the following year, I selected six students from the 2019 cohort (three from Business and three from Education) to participate in two rounds of in-depth interviews, accompanied by an analysis of their assignments (see Table 4.2).

items participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Degree	School
1 Wenyi Zhang	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
2 Xuehui Jia	25	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
3 Guilian Chen	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
4 Lina Jia	22	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
5 Lixiang Li	24	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
6 Yufan Hui	24	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
7 Yajing Wang	27	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
8 Weijiao Zhang	35	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
9 Yanan Li	32	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
10 Tianyuan Xu	25	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
11 Yushan Nie	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning

12 Zixin Chen	22	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
13 Shaoming Pan	24	Male	Postgraduate Taught	Business
14 Zhihao Zhang	27	Male	Postgraduate Taught	Business
15 Yaling Che	24	Male	Postgraduate Taught	Business
16 Zetong Li	22	Male	Postgraduate Taught	Business
17 Yawen Shen	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
18 Jiaqian Liu	25	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
19 Zijie Ning	24	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
20 Tianqi Li	22	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
21 Hongxin Sun	22	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
22 Jinghan Yang	22	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
23 Boyang Zou	24	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
24 Ruimeng Zhang	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business

Table 4.1 Demographic Information about the Participants 2018 cohort

items participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Degree	Number of Assignment	School
1 Yuxin Bai	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	5	Education and Lifelong Learning
2 Ailin Zhang	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	4	Education and Lifelong Learning
3 Xiaocao Wang	24	Female	Postgraduate Taught	4	Education and Lifelong Learning
4 Qing Zhai	26	Female	Postgraduate Taught	2	Business
5 Bohua Huang	23	Male	Postgraduate Taught	4	Business
6 Mingchao Wu	25	Male	Postgraduate Taught	3	Business

Table 4.2 Demographic Information about the Participants 2019 cohort

The survey indicated that the participants shared several common demographic characteristics. All were in their twenties or thirties, had completed their primary and secondary education in China, and had obtained their undergraduate degrees from Chinese universities. None of the participants had any prior experience studying abroad in a formal academic setting.

Before beginning their postgraduate studies, newly enrolled international students at the university were offered a pre-session English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme designed to prepare them for graduate-level coursework. In addition, the university provided a range of in-session EAP courses throughout the academic year to support students' ongoing academic development. To gain a comprehensive understanding of Chinese students' academic writing experiences during their studies in the UK, I aimed to track their writing progress from the point at which they first engaged with the university's academic practices. This longitudinal approach allowed me to interact with the participants as they entered a new academic community and to develop an in-depth understanding of the academic norms and practices of the institution.

4.2.2 Sampling Strategy

This study adopted a convenience sampling strategy, which involves selecting participants based on their accessibility and proximity to the researcher (Etikan et al., 2015). As a Chinese student studying at the same university, I had direct access to potential participants and was familiar with the research setting, making this sampling approach feasible and efficient. Convenience sampling is a non-probability technique frequently used in exploratory research where the goal is to gain initial insights into a particular phenomenon rather than to produce findings that are broadly generalisable (Etikan et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, the limitations of convenience sampling must be acknowledged. One major concern is the potential for sampling bias, as the sample may not fully represent the wider population (Farrokhi and Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2011). To address this issue, I intentionally recruited participants from two academic departments (Education and Business) and collected

data from two separate cohorts (2018 and 2019). This strategy helped widen the diversity of participants and provided a broader range of experiences and perspectives, thereby mitigating some of the limitations typically associated with convenience sampling.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

According to Creswell (2010), research methods refer to the procedures researchers use to collect, interpret and analyse data. Cohen et al. (2007) further describe research methods as a series of approaches aimed at achieving explanation, interpretation, inference and prediction. From this perspective, research questions play a central role in determining the appropriateness of specific methods and in clarifying whether these methods should be quantitative or qualitative in nature (Wellington, 2000). In this study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to address the research questions. Quantitative data were primarily generated through the structure of the survey, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and, for the second cohort, through an analysis of students' written assignments.

The research design strongly influenced the implementation of the study and the procedures used for data collection. A sequential exploratory design was adopted, whereby findings from the qualitative phase were further explained through insights gained in the quantitative phase (Creswell, 2010). The first round of data collection consisted of two stages. First, participants completed a survey, which constituted the basis for quantitative analysis. Following this, participants who volunteered took part in semi-structured interviews. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, audio-recorded, transcribed and subsequently translated into English.

The second round of data collection also consisted of two stages. I conducted interviews with students during the first semester and again toward the end of their postgraduate programme. At the second interview stage, I additionally collected their written assignments for analysis. These assignments were used to supplement the interview data and to provide deeper insights into the students' academic writing development.

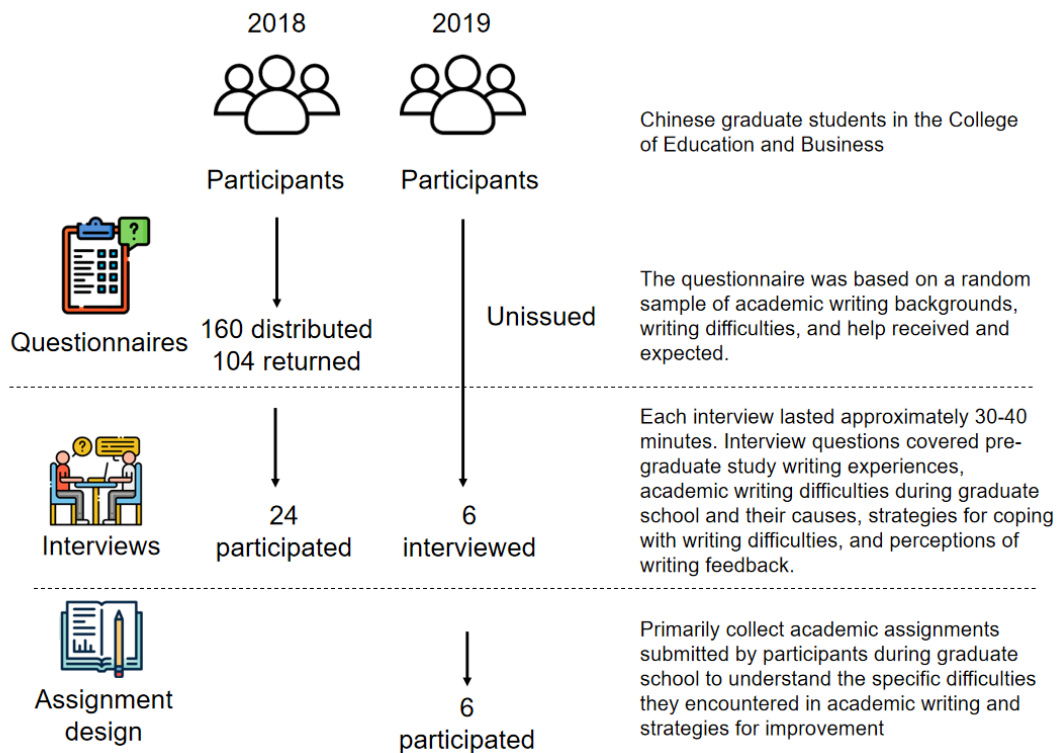


Figure 4.3 Procedure for data collection

4.3.1 Survey

Surveys are widely regarded as an effective method of data collection due to their ability to illuminate the research problem, clarify theoretical constructs and identify measurable variables (Johnson and Turner, 2003; Wilson and Maclean, 1994). Surveys also provide an overview of participants' perceptions and key research themes (Cohen et al., 2000), and allow researchers to triangulate findings generated through other research instruments (Oppenheim, 1992). Furthermore, survey data can highlight areas requiring deeper exploration during subsequent qualitative interviews.

The survey used in this study was developed following an in-depth review of literature on Chinese students' challenges and difficulties with academic writing. The instrument was refined through a pilot study conducted with students from several faculties. Their responses informed the decision to focus the main study on Education and Business students, both because these groups were representative and because their assessments were primarily essay-based.

A Participant Information Statement accompanied the survey, outlining the purpose of the study and ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, confidentiality, anonymity and the researcher's contact details. The body of the survey was aligned with the core research questions (Cohen et al., 2007) and elicited information relating to students' perceptions of academic writing and the specific challenges they faced.

The survey included both closed-ended and open-ended items. Closed-ended questions used a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," enabling the measurement of students' attitudes toward various aspects of academic writing. For example, one item asked students to evaluate the statement: "The skills of reading and writing would challenge English academic writing." Open-ended questions invited students to provide more detailed responses, such as: "What additional academic writing courses would you need?"

The survey was piloted with a small group of Chinese PGT students to ensure clarity and relevance. Minor revisions were made based on their feedback. A total of 160 questionnaires were distributed to the 2018 cohort, and 104 were completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 65%. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to identify key patterns and trends in students' responses.

4.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Wellington (2000) argues that interviews can be considered one of the most important instruments in qualitative research because they enable researchers to elicit participants' perspectives, interpretations, constructions of reality and definitions of situations. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe the qualitative interview as a structured and purposeful conversation that goes beyond everyday dialogue; it facilitates the spontaneous exchange of views and has become a refined method of questioning and listening designed to obtain well-examined information. According to Kvale (1996), the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to understand the world from the participants' point of view by uncovering the meaning of their experiences and their lived worlds before imposing scientific interpretations. Interviews thus allow researchers to grasp the meanings conveyed by participants (Kvale, 2009) and to capture

their perspectives in greater depth (Yin, 2009). They not only help researchers understand experiences but also allow them to reconstruct events as narrated by participants (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). For these reasons, interviews were adopted as a principal method in this study, consistent with their role as one of the most widely used knowledge-producing practices in qualitative research (Punch and Oancea, 2014).

Interviews can be categorised into unstructured, semi-structured and fully structured formats (Robson, 2006). Positioned between unstructured and structured interviews, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to prepare guiding questions in advance while still offering the flexibility to explore issues beyond the protocol (Lodico et al., 2006). Compared with fully structured interviews, semi-structured interviews provide greater adaptability to different respondents and contexts (Punch and Oancea, 2014). Given that this study sought to explore specific themes from participants' perspectives, the semi-structured format was deemed most appropriate.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of Chinese PGT students' academic writing experiences. The interviews were guided by a protocol consisting of open-ended questions and prompts. These questions explored students' goals for academic writing, their interpretation of writing tasks, their relationships with writing and the ways in which they engaged with tutor feedback to improve their writing skills.

The interview protocol was developed based on the research questions and informed by the literature review. It was piloted with two Chinese PGT students to ensure clarity and relevance, and minor adjustments were made in response to their feedback.

In the 2018 cohort, 24 students volunteered to participate in interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the participants' native language. This enabled students to express themselves more comfortably and reduced the likelihood of misunderstandings caused by language barriers. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim and subsequently translated into English for analysis. To ensure translation accuracy, a subset of the translated transcripts was

back-translated into Chinese by a bilingual researcher and compared with the original recordings.

4.3.3 Document Analysis

In addition to the interview data, samples of students' written assignments were collected and analysed to gain further insight into their academic writing practices and the nature of the feedback provided by tutors. For the 2019 cohort, six students—three from the Business School and three from the School of Education—were selected for document analysis. Each student submitted between two and five written assignments, accompanied by the corresponding tutor feedback.

A coding scheme was developed to guide the analysis of the assignments. The coding framework focused on key aspects of academic writing, including text structure and organisation, the use of sources and evidence, the clarity and coherence of argumentation, and linguistic accuracy and style. Tutor feedback was examined using the same framework to identify recurring strengths and weaknesses in students' writing as well as the instructional strategies and improvement suggestions offered by tutors.

The document analysis provided valuable insights into students' actual writing performance and the difficulties they experienced in meeting the academic writing expectations of their respective disciplines. It also illuminated how students engaged with tutor feedback and how such feedback supported the development of their academic writing skills over time.

4.4 Data Analysis

The data collected through the questionnaire, interviews and document analysis were examined using a combination of quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques. Questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to identify general patterns and trends in students' responses. Open-ended survey responses were coded thematically in order to capture recurrent issues and emerging themes.

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, a systematic method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework:

1. Familiarisation with the data: I immersed myself in the interview transcripts through repeated reading and initial note-taking to identify early patterns and ideas.

2. Generating initial codes: Interesting features across the dataset were coded systematically, and relevant data extracts were collated. For instance, codes such as "language difficulties," "vocabulary limitations," and "grammar problems" were grouped under the broader theme "language-related challenges."

3. Searching for themes: Initial codes were organised into potential themes, and all data relevant to each theme were gathered. Codes relating to language challenges, academic conventions, critical thinking and academic identity were consolidated into broader thematic categories.

4. Reviewing themes: The themes were reviewed in relation to the coded extracts and the full data set. This iterative process resulted in the development of a coherent thematic map.

5. Defining and naming themes: Each theme was refined to clarify its meaning and contribution to the overall analytical narrative, and clear definitions and labels were assigned.

6. Producing the report: Compelling and representative data extracts were selected and related back to the research questions and existing literature, producing a scholarly, coherent account of the findings.

The analysis of students' written assignments and tutor feedback followed a similar coding and thematic approach. The findings from the document analysis were triangulated with interview data to provide a richer and more comprehensive understanding of students' academic writing experiences and the challenges they encountered in meeting disciplinary expectations.

4.5 Researcher Positionality and Reflection

As a Chinese student who has undertaken postgraduate studies in the UK, I share similar academic writing experiences with the participants in this study. My personal journey through the transition to UK academic writing norms has shaped my understanding of the challenges faced by Chinese PGT students and provided me with an “insider” perspective that facilitated the development of rapport during interviews. This positionality allowed me to better understand participants’ emotions, struggles and concerns. However, it also carried the potential risk of introducing assumptions and biases into the research process.

My own adaptation to UK academic writing involved navigating unfamiliar academic norms, developing critical thinking skills and learning the linguistic and structural complexity of English academic writing. While academic writing in the Chinese context often emphasises summarising and reproducing established knowledge, academic writing in the UK places greater value on independent thinking, critical analysis and originality. This cultural shift represented one of the greatest challenges in my academic transition. To adapt, I actively participated in the university’s pre-session course during my first year, which introduced key academic expectations, disciplinary writing conventions and practical writing strategies. Outside formal classes, I engaged extensively with academic journal articles and books to familiarise myself with academic style, argument structure and citation practices. I also exchanged writing experiences with international peers and made use of writing support services such as writing centres, tutors’ office hours and peer discussions. These strategies gradually helped me adjust to UK academic writing and deepened my awareness of the challenges encountered by participants. This awareness informed the design of my questionnaire and interview questions, enabling me to approach the research with greater empathy and sensitivity.

Despite these advantages, I remained conscious of the possibility that my personal experiences could shape data interpretation. To minimise the influence of subjective bias, I employed multiple strategies throughout the research process. First, triangulation was used to enhance the credibility of the findings by drawing on multiple data sources, including surveys, interviews

and document analysis. Second, member checking was conducted by sharing interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations with participants to ensure that their perspectives were represented accurately. I also maintained a neutral stance during interactions with participants, encouraging them to articulate their experiences freely and independently. Third, I kept a research journal to record reflective notes, critically examine my assumptions and document analytical decisions. Finally, peer debriefing involved inviting fellow researchers to review my coding, interpretations and emerging themes to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis.

4.6 Ensuring the Quality of the Data

I adopted a number of measures to enhance the overall reliability and validity of the collected data which are discussed in this section. I conducted a pilot study which enabled me to test the validity and reliability of the survey and interview questions. In the context of qualitative research, I discuss how I address the trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of my study. Finally, I explain how I used triangulation to enhance the quality and reliability of the findings.

4.6.1 Pilot Study

Pilot studies are defined as “small scale versions or trial runs, done in preparation for the major study” (Polit et al., 2001, p. 467). During the study design cycle, a pilot study tool is necessary to check the availability, feasibility and clarity of the study before carrying it out (Wallen and Fraenkel, 2001). Likewise, De Vaus (2002) highlights the importance of the pilot study, simply recommending, “Do not take the risk. Pilot test first” (p. 54).

My pilot study involved handing out the survey and interviewing four Chinese students, two of them postgraduate taught students and two of them studying for a PhD. Two were studying in the department of education while the other two were studying in the department of business (see Table 4.3).

Name	Age	Gender	Subject
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Weici	28	Male	Education (Ph.D)
Tingting	35	Female	Education (PGT)
Wangqiang	24	Male	Business (PGT)
Liufei	30	Female	Business (Ph.D)

Table 4.3 Demographic Information about the Participants in the pilot study

In piloting the survey, respondents were specifically asked to report the difficulties that they might have in understanding the survey questions. Based on their feedback, some items that the participants found ambiguous, repetitious and even unrelated were revised, clarified, rewritten, and changed.

The pilot interviews were also very valuable. At the end of the pilot interview, participants generated or directly proposed many suggestions and modifications. For example, participants felt they needed occasional cues to ask questions more effectively and deeply during the interview. Prompts do play an important role as questions in semi-structured interviews as effective prompts keep people talking and help researchers when the responses from participants are jumbled (Leech, 2002).

Pilot sessions were also vital in giving me the opportunity to familiarise myself with the practical steps needed to conduct interviews. Overall, the pilot study helped to ensure that all the survey items and interview questions were relevant to the research questions and objectives of the study.

4.6.2 Reliability and Validity of the Survey

Reliability and validity are considered the two main criteria to evaluate a research instrument (Punch and Oancea, 2014). According to Oppenheim (1992), reliability makes up the purity and consistency of a measure, and the repeatability, and the probability of getting the same results. The reliability of a research method also reflects the extent to which this method is immune to random errors. Validity, which refers to the extent to which a concept is accurately measured in a quantitative study (Heale and Twycross, 2015), is the second important criterion

in the measurement of the survey. The validity of a research method refers to the extent to which the method applied is able to measure what it is supposed to measure (Oppenheim, 1992). In order to check and examine the validity of the survey and interview questions, they were checked by my supervisors and tested for validity through the pilot study, then modified based on supervisors' comments and pilot results.

4.6.3 Trustworthiness of the Research

As argued by Richards (2009), while the validity and reliability of research methods can be evaluated in a quantitative research, the terms are not as useful in judging the quality of qualitative research because the researcher's biased views can exert effects on the process in which data are collected and analyzed (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, the notion of "trustworthiness" has been proposed when assessing whether qualitative research is qualified and credible (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As defined by Bryman (2008, p. 700), trustworthiness refers to "a set of criteria" that informs such an assessment, criteria that consist of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

4.6.3.1 Credibility

As defined by Yilmaz and Liu (2020), credibility refers to the methods, procedures and sources used to create a high degree of harmony between the expressions of the participants and the interpretations of the researcher. It can be seen that credibility is a particularly complex research aspect. Since the adoption of various information sources is helpful in terms of validating and increasing clarity, or precision of findings in studies, triangulation is often employed (Polit and Beck, 2012). In the present study, triangulation was conducted at two levels: the methods and participants. From the perspective of methods, a survey and semi-structured interviews were employed for data collection, while, from the perspective of participants, the data came from two sources: Chinese PGT students from business school and education school.

4.6.3.2 Transferability

Transferability is defined as the applicability of the research findings in other different contexts

(Polit and Beck, 2012). This is also a criterion that should be taken into account in this research. Creswell (2016) has pointed out that qualitative researchers are reluctant to generalize from one case to another due to the contexts of the cases differing. Countering this position, Cope (2014) has argued that the reader can assess whether the results may be applicable in different situations or contexts through the information provided by the author.

Although the focus of the present study is on the English academic writing experiences of Chinese PGT students in the UK, these experiences can be generalized in the wider context of other Chinese PGT students studying in other countries where English is the first language. This is because these postgraduates share similar cultural, educational and linguistic backgrounds. Moreover, the present study offers helpful insights for the universities and tutors in the UK as they may enable them to better understand the complex experiences of learners in terms of academic writing. Therefore, I would argue, the results and recommendations of the current study can be generalized to a certain extent.

4.6.3.3 Dependability

In qualitative research, dependability involves an inquiry into the context and method of deriving data (Richards, 2009). It is further confirmed that the inquiry must include the offering of details about the association between the method and the research objectives and should explain how the data was collected and how these methods were used to produce and analyze the data (Richards, 2009). In the present study, I sought to achieve dependability by providing a systematic description of the procedures followed in the study. Providing such information and technical details in the process of a specific research can help other researchers to conduct the same study in a different context (Shenton, 2004).

4.6.3.4 Confirmability

According to Polit and Beck (2012), the significance of confirmability comes from the need of guaranteeing that the findings obtained in the studies represent the experience and thinking of research participants and are not simply the product of researcher biases. In the present study, confirmability was achieved through the application of respondent validation, and the data

analysis results were validated by the research participants, namely, the data interpretation and conclusion, for the purpose of ensuring that the researcher's interpretations were in line with their intended meanings. This was achieved by sending the participants the transcripts of interviews and asking them to validate whether the transcripts and subsequent explanations were consistent with their views.

4.6.4 Triangulation

Triangulation is the last strategy used to guarantee qualified data and verifiable findings. As defined by Creswell and Miller (2000), it refers to the search for convergence among multiple and diverse information sources so as to shape certain topics or categories in a study. Flick (2010) defined it as the strategy that researchers employ to incorporate different perspectives on a phenomenon under a study so as to answer research questions. There are several major triangulation protocols, including methodological triangulation, data source triangulation, theory triangulation and investigator triangulation (Patton, 1999).

In terms of methodological triangulation, triangulation is a combination of approaches to reinforce research, namely, a few types of approaches or data, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Patton, 2002). Therefore, multiple research methods, consisting of surveys, semi-structured interviews and document analysis were employed to collect data for the study. Since the way in which researchers carry out their work potentially influences their findings in social sciences, it is important to use multiple methods in a single study to clarify or eliminate extraneous impact (Jack and Raturi, 2006). The surveys, interviews and document analysis used in this study are complementary to each other. In surveys, a few basic questions were asked and in interviews, similar questions were avoided to prevent repetition, so that the other field which was not explored in surveys could be explored in interviews and students' assignments. The rationale for the adoption of this combined method lies in that the weaknesses inherent in any research method can be offset by the advantages of other methods if these advantages are properly combined (Jack and Raturi, 2006). Therefore, triangulation offers a deeper explanation of the participants' different perceptions of the English academic writing experience at British universities. In addition, data source triangulation was also used in this

study. In methodological triangulation, different methods are used to collect a variety of data sources, while in data source triangulation, the same method is employed to collect data in different spaces with different people (Denzin, 2006). More specifically, data source triangulation was accomplished through the collection of data from two groups of participants: Chinese PGT students from two university departments, business and education. As previously mentioned, this was completed in order to gain a greater variety of perspectives on the studied phenomenon.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical and moral considerations are essential in scientific and educational research. Wellington (2000) regards ethics as a comprehensive term that encompasses moral principles regarding people's behavior and actions, arguing that it is particularly important for educational researchers to consider ethical issues. Similarly, Creswell (2003) suggests that researchers should recognize all ethical issues that are likely to occur across all research stages, including research questions, research problem statement and data collection. Also, ethical responsibility is required in each stage of a research process, from the research design, the recruitment of participants, to their treatment during research procedures and the outcomes of their participation (Miller and Brewer, 2003).

In the light of the different aspects of this research design, some ethical and moral issues were important to be considered. As a result, a series of procedures were followed to effectively resolve these issues and protect the participants' rights. An ethics application was submitted and approved by the Chair of Schools Ethics Committee, confirming that the researcher would uphold the participants' dignity and privacy. Audio recordings and other documents were stored in password-protected areas of the computer. The data collected was only used for academic purposes. Where I used quotes from interviews in writing up the project, I used pseudonyms and took other necessary steps to make sure participants could not be identified through their responses. The interviewees were given the transcript of their interview for reviewing and editing. They were given six months from the receipt of the transcripts during which they could ask to have anything in the transcripts omitted or changed.

In terms of the interview itself, I was prepared to stop the interview at any time if students felt uncomfortable. I was aware that the interview could potentially raise issues of concern to the student. I had information to hand about how students could access support in the university, for example, Student Services.

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). All participants received a detailed information sheet explaining the study's purpose, procedures and potential risks and benefits, and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants' personal data were treated confidentially, stored securely and anonymised through the use of pseudonyms in all published materials.

Efforts were made to minimise any potential harm or discomfort. Although the study did not involve foreseeable risks, I was attentive to participants' emotional well-being and sought to create a respectful and supportive interview environment. Reciprocity was also an important ethical principle in this study. Participants received a small gift voucher as recognition of their time and contributions, and I shared the study findings with them, offering resources to support their ongoing academic writing development. All data were stored in accordance with the university's data protection policies and will be destroyed following institutional guidelines.

Throughout the research process, I sought to maintain high ethical standards and to respect the rights, autonomy and well-being of all participants. Regular discussions with my supervisors and consultations with the university's ethics committee supported the ethical rigour of the study.

4.8 Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into Chinese PGT students' academic writing experiences in the UK, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First, the study was conducted at a single university in the UK, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. However, the use of multiple data sources and the inclusion of participants

from two different departments helped to capture a more diverse range of experiences and perspectives.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data from participants, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccurate recall. To mitigate this limitation, I triangulated the data from different sources (questionnaire, interviews, and document analysis) to enhance the credibility of the findings.

Third, as a cross-sectional study, this research captured participants' experiences at a particular point in time. A longitudinal design that follows students' writing development over an extended period could provide a more comprehensive understanding of their academic writing journeys.

Despite these limitations, this study makes a valuable contribution to the literature on international students' academic writing experiences and provides practical implications for supporting their writing development in higher education contexts.

4.9 Summary

This chapter has presented the methodological foundation of the study, explaining how a mixed methods design was employed to investigate the academic writing experiences of Chinese PGT students in the UK. By integrating quantitative data from the questionnaire with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews and document analysis, the study was able to develop a comprehensive understanding of students' writing challenges, perceptions and developmental trajectories. The chapter also outlined the research context, participant selection and data collection procedures, followed by an explanation of how descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used to interpret the data in a systematic and rigorous manner. In addition, the strategies adopted to ensure the trustworthiness and ethical integrity of the research—including reflexive practice, triangulation and adherence to institutional ethical guidelines—were discussed, alongside an acknowledgement of the study's limitations and potential avenues for future inquiry. Together, the methodological choices described in this chapter establish a transparent and robust basis for the analysis and discussion of findings presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 Culture Shock in Academic Writing

5.1 Introduction

Building on the mixed-methods design outlined in Chapter 4, this chapter initiates the presentation of findings by examining how Chinese PGT students experience and negotiate academic writing within the cultural and institutional context of a UK university. Chapters 5 to 8 present the results of the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and document analysis, organised around the major themes that address Research Questions 1–3.

This chapter focuses specifically on culture shock as it emerges in students' academic writing practices. The analysis highlights how students encounter tensions between their prior educational experiences and the expectations of UK academic discourse, and how these tensions shape their writing behaviours, challenges and adaptations. Drawing on thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the chapter presents patterns in students' narratives and written work, offering a detailed account of how cultural and academic transitions influence their understanding of argumentation, criticality and academic conventions.

Through this lens, the chapter provides the foundation for subsequent discussions of learning strategies, institutional support and identity negotiation explored in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

5.2 Key Themes

Several key themes emerged from the analysis of the data, shedding light on the academic writing experiences of Chinese PGT students:

- Culture shock in academic writing
- Social relationships in academic writing
- Academic writing challenges
- Strategies to address academic writing difficulties

These themes are discussed in detail in the following sections, drawing on the quantitative and

qualitative data and engaging with relevant literature from social learning theory and academic literacies.

5.3 Culture shock of Chinese PGT students

A major theme emerging from the data is the academic culture shock experienced by Chinese PGT students as they adjust to the writing expectations of UK higher education. Participants repeatedly described challenges in adapting to the emphasis on independent and critical thinking, as well as to the broader notion of academic freedom that characterises the UK academic environment. Students understood independent and critical thinking as involving autonomy in selecting writing topics, engaging in analytical reading and incorporating personal perspectives into their arguments—expectations that differed markedly from their previous learning experiences. Likewise, many regarded academic freedom as a distinctive and unfamiliar feature of UK postgraduate study, contributing to the sense of disorientation they experienced in their academic transition. These two constructs—*independent and critical thinking*, and *academic freedom*—thus emerged as central dimensions of academic culture shock encountered by the participants.

This pattern is consistent with the concept of “learning shock” (Griffiths et al., 2005), which refers to the disorientation international students often experience when exposed to unfamiliar pedagogical and epistemological norms. For Chinese PGT students, the transition from a more structured, teacher-directed academic environment to one that prioritises autonomy, critique and originality required not only the acquisition of new writing strategies but also a shift in their understanding of what constitutes legitimate academic knowledge.

From the perspective of academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998), the culture shock experienced by these students reflects a deeper clash between prior writing practices and the tacit conventions of the UK academic community. Academic writing is not merely a technical skill but a socially situated practice shaped by disciplinary values and communicative norms. As newcomers to this context, Chinese PGT students must learn to interpret and negotiate expectations that may differ significantly from those shaped by their earlier educational

experiences.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation provides further insight into this process. Students enter the UK academic community as peripheral participants, unfamiliar with local writing conventions and evaluative criteria. Through interactions with tutors, engagement with feedback, participation in coursework and collaboration with peers, they gradually move toward fuller participation in the community of practice. This gradual process of immersion helps explain how students begin to internalise new academic norms, adapt their writing practices and redefine their academic identities over time.

5.3.1 Independent and Critical Thinking

When asked to reflect on their writing experiences and share their major challenges while writing in their postgraduate study in the UK, participants frequently mentioned that the most prominent difference between writing in China and the UK is that they had to think independently and critically. Students demonstrated an awareness of the differences in the writing expectations in the two academic environments. Moreover, many students explicitly elaborated their experiences of understanding and demonstrating thinking in their writing process. In the following sections, I present participants perspectives on independent and critical thinking and English writing in Chinese universities.

5.3.1.1 Student's Perspective on Independent and Critical Thinking

Most of the participants stated that academic writing is not simply a matter of structuring words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters, but a thinking process that must be intertwined with strong social and cultural concepts. In this sense, they considered that "independent thinking" and "critical thinking" as central to the writing culture contributed significantly to their experience of academic culture shock. Participants made clear distinctions between thinking and writing when comparing studying in China and in the UK. In their opinion, their academic writing experience in the UK was more like entering a community of practice compared to following a template to complete an essay as they were used to doing in China. Hence, students had an

understanding of needing to read with a critical eye in this new environment, be critique-established authors, and incorporating their own voice in their writing in order to meet the writing requirements.

Yajing talked about the difference in writing between China and the UK as follows:

When I write in Chinese, I don't have to think and point out a lot of my own perspectives, but when I write in the UK, I have to think a lot and incorporate my opinions in writing and combine with the literature.

Yajing, Education

Shang stated that:

I think in the UK, the tutor requires more of the student's own thoughts than in China, and students need to express their own opinions according to literature.

Shang, Business

Many other participants identified independent and critical thinking involved in writing as a significant challenge for them in their postgraduate studies.

Yushan (PhD student) described the academic writing requirements in the UK by comparing them to those she was familiar with in China. For her, key aspects were the need to engage in independent thinking from her own experiences and the requirement to express her own opinions in an assignment:

When I write assignments in China, I do not have to think in-depth and express too much my own opinion since it is objective. I just describe and summarise what I read. In contrast, in the UK, writing requires my own perspective, and I need to think from the bottom and select articles carefully. During this process, my academic writing and thinking skills have been improved. I became more confident in my writing. However, the most difficult part is to explain the deeper meaning behind a topic. Sometimes I know this topic is very meaningful, but it is very difficult to express the importance in the assignments and reveal deeper meanings at the personal level or even the social and cultural level.

Yushan, Education

Yushan had gradually got to grips with how to comment on the research literature over the

course of her doctoral programme and had become more confident in her ability to engage critically. However, she still found it difficult to use critical and independent thinking in the discussion part of her thesis, especially when it came to connecting her own research to previous studies. The issue for her was not solely a language barrier but a lack of relevant knowledge:

This was a totally new approach to me. I think I have not made sufficient preparations for studying in the UK for postgraduate studies, especially in terms of literature reading and analyzing ability and related professional knowledge reserves. Although I wrote assignments in English when I studied in China and passed the IELTS test before coming to the UK, all of them were not a test of my creativity or knowledge of subject areas but just the test of language.

Yushan, Education

Yawen discussed how language tutors (in pre and in-session classes) also placed emphasis on the importance of critical thinking in the UK:

In writing support lessons, the tutor told us we should critically synthesise what we find into our ideas and be able to support our ideas with research. In addition, we must improve our inferential abilities, draw conclusions from given information, and recognize the degree of certainty with which our own or others' conclusions follow. It is like critical analysis to pull things together in a meaningful way.

Therefore, when I want to research and analyze a specific issue, I have to present several opposing viewpoints. Then I need to choose a side and back it up. Instead of approaching things solely from my own point of view, I must consider opposing viewpoints and try to find a way to argue with them.

Yawen, Business

Students were aware that critical thinking was important not only in the writing process but also in the way they read articles and planned their writing process. While it was seen as difficult, students also recognized that improving their critical thinking skills enabled them to make the best use of available resources to achieve their own goals. Tianqi, for instance, told me:

After I studied in the UK, I discovered that critical thinking is valued. In the beginning, I firmly believed in what the author wrote. However, when I understand critical thinking, I would like to read articles by authors with different views because I noticed that both of them could provide very reasonable arguments. After reading a lot of related journals, I would have my perspective. This process is very important for my study.

Tianqi, Business

Reading critically was a challenge for Zijie and she saw this very much as integral to her writing process and therefore, affected her ability and confidence to express herself: “I think the opinions published in authoritative journals are completely correct, especially articles written by well-known experts in the field”. After attending some sessions and receiving guidance from the tutor, she learned to incorporate multiple opinions and further synthesize various theories to build her arguments in writing. Through the improvement of her critical thinking, Zijie could better demonstrate her deep understanding of different viewpoints and express her own opinions clearly.

As can be seen from the above, most of the Chinese postgraduate students in the sample believed that critical thinking had been a major challenge when studying in the UK. Nonetheless, it should not be ignored how Chinese students’ use of critical thinking skills are related to their positioning in the context of postgraduate thesis writing. For instance, Lina positioned herself as a learner, believing that acquiring knowledge was her first and most important goal while studying in the UK:

I feel that my knowledge and abilities are limited, and the opinions expressed are not as professional as those with more authoritative knowledge. I just hope to acquire more knowledge by reading the literature to achieve the purpose of learning.

Lina, Education

Unlike Lina, Weijiao positioned herself as a researcher. For her, critical thinking is more than just academic skills but is a set of skills that can and should be used in a variety of practical settings:

Reading literature is a crucial way to acquire knowledge, but it is more important to reflect on existing knowledge so as to innovate and contribute to my field. In this way, critical thinking is very important during academic writing.

Weijiao, Education

The quotes I have chosen to include illustrate how independent and critical thinking plays an important role in academic writing for students studying in UK universities and this approach may be quite unfamiliar to them. I have also shown that students are not only aware of the

challenges but are able to adapt to the UK academic writing model and improve their critical thinking skills.

5.3.1.2 English Writing in Chinese Universities

Some students attributed the lack of critical and independent thinking to the examination-oriented system in China. Almost all the participants reported that in China, they wrote primarily to get high scores in their English exams, and to do this, they had to follow certain successful models, even for the IELTS test. Students were invariably told what to write and how to write it, along with specific models to follow. In other words, independent and critical thinking when writing in English was not valued in their previous experience. The assessment approach meant that students paid attention to improving English language skills rather than developing independent and critical thinking. This highlights how the requirements and criteria for passing exams will largely determine where students will place their effort. When coming to the UK, students are suddenly met with different values and are expected to demonstrate independent thinking and analytical skills.

Zhihao from Business argued that the criteria for judging his English writing was entirely different in China compared to the UK:

When I studied in China, I always learned writing in English by the samples. I was familiar with the format and remembered samples. I usually filled the content into the template during writing. This writing method is very simple and can help me get a high score and positive comments. However, when I studied in the UK, writing reports, essays, and assignments, all required me to pay more attention to expressing my own opinions which could help me receive positive feedback and get higher marks.

Zhihao, Business

Students also contrasted tutors in China to the tutors in the UK. The emphasis and requirements for English writing were very different:

In China, our teacher asks students to follow specific writing format and pay more attention to grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure during the writing process. I had been used to this writing style until I came to the UK. I did not want to break the writing tradition in my mind. But now I wonder this way is just for taking exams in China and I need to acquire more academic writing skills in the UK.

Lixiang, Education

When I attended some writing lessons in the UK, I realized that in the writing of the current programme, I should read articles critically and express my own perspectives in assignments. I also noticed that there is no standard way to write. Therefore, I should change the writing style and be more familiar with the evaluation criteria in the UK.

Jiaqian, Business

However, some students pointed out that when writing in China, they also expressed their own opinions, for example, when they filled in content in the sample. But such expression was considered risky by their teachers. The important thing was to meet teachers' expectations as that was the way to ensure high scores in tests:

Sometimes teachers ask students to make sure they use accurate vocabulary and grammar and write in a "safe way", it means that students should point out what they are supposed to claim rather than thinking creatively in their writing. Because teachers worry that those who grade students' papers give low scores for novel or extreme statements.

Yawen, Business

As can be seen from the above quotes, Chinese students come from a system in which they have been focused on getting a high score in high-stakes English tests but get little input or practice in academic writing in China universities. Yawen once again articulates the contrast between the two academic cultures: "following instructions benefit students in succeeding in the fierce competition of the Chinese educational system. However, thinking independently and creatively can meet UK academic writing standards".

Some participants stated that another possible reason for the lack of critical and independent thinking among Chinese students was that Chinese English teachers themselves were not trained to think either, and thus the lack of critical and independent thinking was passed from teachers to students. As Boyang put it:

The goal of most Chinese English teachers is to get students to score high in the exam. Therefore, teachers pay more attention to enhancing students' ability of the English language rather than independent and critical thinking. However, when I studied in the UK university, I learned different writing styles from tutors and various members of the new community and strived to conform to the UK norms of academic writing.

Some students thought that the lack of critical and independent thinking was deeply rooted in academic culture in China and that the traditional Chinese writing style also contributed to the challenges facing students when studying in the UK. For instance, Ailin stated that:

Chinese “indirect” writing style comes from the classical essay format used in Chinese imperial examinations, called *ba-gu-wen* (eight-legged essay). Although this kind of literary style was abolished so many years ago, it still influences some students’ writing styles. The part-for-part structure in English essays written by Chinese students is similar to the *ba-gu-wen* structure. *Ba-gu-wen* stipulates a strict writing style while the writing structure in Western countries gives students more opportunities to do critical writing.

Ailin, Education

For Xiaocao, the “*qi-cheng-Zhuan-he*” structure in the Chinese language also explained why she preferred an indirect writing style:

“*Qi*” always introduces the situation rather than explains the thesis statement; “*cheng*” clarifies the writer’s viewpoint and arguments; “*Zhuan*” is the indirect part of the essay as it always turns to another viewpoint that is not directly connected to the major theme and the final part; “*he*” is equivalent to the conclusion part in western rhetorical style. This model differs from the western situation-problem-solution-evaluation schema. Thus, when I started writing assignments in the UK, the structure and writing style were related to my previous writing and learning practices”.

Xiaocao, Education School

While Ailin and Xiaocao associated the lack of critical and independent thinking to traditional Chinese culture, they also stated that following successful models can increase the probability of getting high grades and could save time. Their experience of writing easily and imitating excellent work was closely linked to the exam-oriented education culture, which explains why many Chinese students feel unprepared at the beginning of their study in the UK.

Both Ailin and Xiaocao demonstrate that Chinese postgraduate students are very aware of differences in academic writing in their communities of practice and are able to articulate these differences. In their previous education in China, formulaic writing was highly valued, but in the UK, independent and critical thinking plays a critical role in academic writing. Chinese students come to the UK with successful experiences of writing in the Chinese environment

and then find that they have to learn and adapt to the British environment where academic writing as a social and cultural practice is very different.

In addition, some students argue that the size of typical Chinese classroom makes it difficult for teachers to focus on students' thinking in their writing process. For example, Bohua explained that:

In the UK, our lecture always contained less than 30 students. We thus got many chances to interact with our tutor and could find out more problems or you could get more answers than we did in China. In China, there were more than 50 or even 100 students in one lecture, making teachers unable to look after all of the students.

Bohua, Business

A typical Chinese university classroom, with huge numbers of students, makes it indeed difficult for teachers to engage pupils in writing discussions. Teachers who have to read hundreds of students' essays are unable to judge the students' writing carefully or give detailed comments. However, some participants point out that many Chinese majors have small classes, with only about 30 students in each class, and that in these cases, teachers could potentially follow every student's progress individually.

The majority of the students said that they were aware of the UK's writing requirements, especially autonomous and critical thinking. Their replies highlight how test-oriented English instruction in China influences the role of thinking in writing in China, as well as the culture shock they face when arriving in the UK. For Chinese students, the role of writing and thinking within writing, shifts. Unlike in their past studies, they are expected to use writing as a means of conveying ideas. Writing transforms from a tool required to pass exams to one used to represent and question information, express ideas, and disseminate research findings.

5.3.2 Academic Freedom

As discussed in the previous section, the way that writing is evaluated shapes students' writing style and the content of their writing. When students study in China, they are expected to follow an essay template whereas in the UK, they are expected to express opinions. The notion of

academic freedom is helpful in exploring this contrast further and what it means for Chinese postgraduate students' writing experience in the UK.

5.3.2.1 Academic Freedom in Writing

When students write English essays in China, they are usually given a fixed topic and are asked to complete the composition according to a template. By contrast, in their postgraduate study in the UK, they are expected to be more independent, to have some freedom in choosing topics, for which they need to search related articles, rather than being given readings, and have to write critically about the topic. In the beginning, this makes students feel anxious. For instance, Yuxin narrated her feelings as follows:

When I wrote an assignment for the first time in the current program, the teacher asked us to choose the topic, theory and articles by ourselves. I felt very flustered and didn't know how to start. Then, I participated in academic writing courses and got much guidance from teachers and peers. I gradually integrated into this writing community. After some academic writing training, I gradually mastered and improved my abilities to complete assignments.

Yuxin, Education

The writing style they have developed before coming to the UK enabled them to get high scores whilst building up a basic knowledge of the English language. In the UK university, writing is seen as developing students' ability to engage in critical thinking and encourages Chinese students to express their ideas freely. For instance, Xiaocao explained as following:

Although it was hard to navigate freedom in writing when I just came to the UK when I understood and was familiar with autonomy writing, I noticed that this writing style helped me improve my independent study and critical thinking abilities, which will benefit me for the rest of my life.

Xiaocao, Education School

Nonetheless, some participants stated that freedom in writing did not suit them. They found it difficult to transfer from following a formula to the autonomous writing process expected of them in the UK university and desired more guidance from tutors:

I understand that writing freely can enhance my ability of independent learning and critical thinking skills. I also prefer to acquire knowledge and receive guidance from tutors. I do not have enough related knowledge before coming to the current programme. Thus, I think as a student, inputting related knowledge will be more beneficial.

Lina, Education

At the same time, Lina believes that it is up to her to adapt to the different evaluation criteria in the UK:

Although I am not prepared for writing in autonomy, when I study in the UK postgraduate programme, I should accept the freedom writing style and try my best to research learning goals.

Lina, Education

5.3.2.2 Scaffolding and Mentoring for Chinese PGT students

Scaffolding and the related role of mentoring are vital in helping Chinese postgraduate students overcome culture shock and help them transfer to the autonomous writing expected of them in the UK. Some participants found tutor and institutional support and guidance invaluable in overcoming the challenges of academic writing in the UK:

I am always eager for guidance from my tutor. I hope my tutor recommends related literature and books to me and help me improve my structure of assignments. My tutor may not give me an answer directly, but guides and encourages me to complete the assignments step by step. To be specific, my tutor always provides relevant information and some examples to help me understand what I need to do. And she also encourages me to think independently and motivate me to explore new knowledge. Feedbacks from tutors are really valuable and help correct errors and develop my ability of writing and thinking.

Wenyi, Education School

Students also mentioned participating in academic programmes offered by the university as very helpful in understanding the writing standards and requirements:

I felt so anxious about assignment writing at the beginning, and my tutor suggested to attend some training courses, according to the guidance from the lecture. In this process, I gained more experiences of writing during the postgraduate study and became familiar with the autonomy writing process.

While some participants stated that they received extensive mentoring from individual tutors and support from the university, other students felt that they needed more support to help them acquire knowledge about academic writing. The interview data also showed that often, while help was being offered, Chinese students often missed receiving the help because they were not familiar with how to communicate with tutors and did not understand that they were expected to proactively seek help. For example, Ailin stated that:

Comparing tutors from Chinese universities with those from UK universities, I found that they play different roles in guiding students' writing. Most Chinese tutors tell students what they are supposed to do directly, whereas those in UK universities allow students to think and solve problems by themselves.

Ailin, Education

Qing had a very positive experience when she sought the help of her tutor but recognized that many Chinese students will not do this:

When I ask the teacher for help, the teacher will be very patient to help me solve the problem, but some Chinese students are unwilling to ask the teacher for help and lose the opportunity to be instructed.

Qing, Business

Language barriers combined with cultural shock means that students may also misunderstand suggestions and advice from tutors and supervisors. Thus, another vital issue is that autonomous writing not only needs clear instructions and mentoring but students also need to understand expectations accurately.

5.4 Summary

This chapter has described two key elements that contribute to the culture shock experienced by Chinese postgraduate students: independent, critical thinking and freedom in academic writing. Many participants' responses demonstrate that although they will have studied English in China for more than ten years before coming to the UK to study, this does not guarantee that they can meet the writing requirements in the UK university. This is because English language

instruction and learning in China is examination-oriented, where students are only able to acquire the substance of English to a limited extent. Consequently, their past academic expertise and success, as well as their educational qualifications fail to assist them in navigating postgraduate-level academic writing requirements in the UK. To tackle this type of academic culture shock, students need to acquire more abilities in order to participate in the new community, as shown in the investigation.

Chapter 6 Social Relationships in Academic Writing

6.1 introduction

In Chapter 5 I discussed the nature of the culture shock that Chinese PGT students meet while studying in the UK in terms of writing practices. I have argued that the two main components are the expectation to engage in independent, critical thinking and the freedom they are given in academic writing assignments. Also, I have shown that while they may have learnt to successfully negotiate high stakes examinations and studied English for over ten years before coming to the UK, they are ill prepared to meet writing requirements in a UK university. This is because English language teaching and learning in China is examination-oriented, so students only acquire the substance of English to a limited extent. Consequently, their past academic competencies and educational qualifications may fail to assist them in navigating the very different academic culture and the role academic writing has in the UK. To overcome this type of academic culture shock, students need to acquire the abilities that will enable them to participate in the new community, as suggested in this investigation.

Chinese students experience many challenges in adapting to the academic setting and environment and as suggested in the later sections of the previous chapter, one of these is the very different social relationships they encounter with their tutors and supervisors in the process of writing practices. Thus the findings presented in this chapter will continue to answer the first research question: *What are the academic writing experiences of Chinese Postgraduate Taught students?* The focus moves from how individual students navigate culture shock to how they adapt to the different social relationships within the university. Another significant theme that emerged from the data was the importance of social relationships in the academic writing experiences of Chinese PGT students. Participants highlighted the role of various social relationships, including those with tutors, peers, and family members, in shaping their writing practices.

From a social learning perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991), these social relationships can be understood as part of the community of practice in which Chinese PGT students participate.

Interactions with tutors and peers provide opportunities for learning and the development of academic writing skills.

The concept of scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976) from social learning theory is particularly relevant here. Tutors and more experienced peers can provide scaffolding for Chinese PGT students, guiding them through the academic writing process and gradually withdrawing support as they become more proficient.

Furthermore, the notion of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) from academic literacies helps to explain how social relationships can impact academic writing experiences. Chinese PGT students who have access to supportive tutors and peers may be able to accumulate social and cultural capital that facilitates their academic writing development.

As Nystrand (1989) argues, writing is an interactive social practice. More specifically, “writing interactions happen with present and absent others through discussions and readings and with oneself in different guises as well” (Casanave, 2004, p. 156). Furthermore, social interaction has the potential to enable students to acquire substantial knowledge regarding the writing process and function as a motivating factor for them (Weigle, 2002). It is therefore not surprising, given the social nature of writing and the relational intricacies involved in students’ writing practice, when talking about their writing experiences, most participants referred to the need to navigate social relations. Therefore, findings suggest that for participants in this study interactions with their lecturers, supervisors and peers during their postgraduate study formed an important aspect of their experience.

As students recounted their writing experiences at a UK university, they vividly described how they understood writing as a practice in their academic community. For Chinese PGT students, writing to a large extent involved social interactions with their lecturers, supervisors, peers and even their families. Their reflections on the experience of social interaction in writing were a mixture of anxiety, uncertainty and painful transition. For some students, positive social relations meant considering their potential audiences, showing politeness and avoiding offending people. Moreover, navigating social relations also meant solving conflicts in writing,

especially in collaborative writing. Therefore, this chapter will analyze what social relations meant to students and how Chinese PGT students navigated social relations in their writing practices.

This chapter uses a thematic analysis approach to explore Chinese postgraduate students' experiences of social practices in academic writing in the UK. The thematic analysis approach enables the identification and interpretation of Chinese students' patterns of academic writing from qualitative data, enabling the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics behind the data, revealing how students' interactions with their tutors affect their adaptation to academic writing and how they change. Specific steps included initial data organization, identifying initial codes through repeated readings of the data, clarifying themes based on these codes, and then reviewing and defining these themes. This process helped to systematically extract key information related to academic acculturation from students' narratives.

6.2 Audiences' requirements and expectations

According to Brandt (1990, p. 14), writing is “not the narrow ability to deal with texts, but the broad ability to deal with people”. Casanave (2004, p. 159) posits that people always involve “real, imagined and imaginary audiences” during writing. Therefore, analyzing the data from the social practice perspective of literacy (Street, 2003) can help clarify how the participants' notions of audience changed as they were socialized into participation in the social practices of their new community. In this study, different kinds of audiences are analyzed to reflect Chinese PGT students' social relationships with people in their community.

The first audience I will focus on is tutors and their expectations of students' assignments. Students in this study were fully aware that they had to address the tutors' expectations in their writing. They kept in mind that in developing their written assignment, they must involve the potential reader collaboratively. In most cases, students referred to the importance of visualizing their supervisors and peers as audiences in the writing process. It is evident that to meet the requirements of academic writing in postgraduate programmes, students had to think

about what their lecturers expected to see in their assignments. Alini stated that:

Our lecturers generally provide general assignments requirements, and the specific topic selection and content need to be determined by ourselves. In this sense, when I write my assignments, I have to make the background and my statements as clear as possible in the assignments.

Ailin, Education School

Zhaiqing identified that a group project had to take the lecturer as the reader while also taking into account group members' feelings:

In a group project, we need to work together to complete an assignment. This task requires us to have a clear division of labour, with each person doing their part and letting others understand what they have done. Then work together to make our entire assignments more logical and coherent.

Zhaoqing, Business school

Shaoming explained that for his supervisors (Business), presentation was as important as text:

I always keep my supervisors' requirements and expectations in mind, and then write accordingly. For example, I always try to make my assignments look nice and serious by inserting pictures and tables and adjusting and aligning the format of word text, thereby making it easy for my supervisors to understand.

Shaoming, Business school

For many participants in this study like Shaoming, their evaluators were their tutors and therefore, they wrote in order to meet what they thought the tutors expected (Lea and Street, 2000). Meeting tutors' expectations and getting positive feedback is crucial for students. In order to complete an assignment, students considered tutors as their potential readers, planned accordingly ahead and kept everything organized. They also took on the notion of 'readability' from the difficulties they encountered with reading texts:

When I read the literature, illogical articles or unclear expressions make it difficult for me to grasp the core points quickly. Therefore, when I write a paper, I try to make my point clear and make it easy to read.

Xuehui, Education School

Xuehui demonstrates her awareness of readers and her intention to make her assignment easy

to understand. It suggests that she has internalized some of the elements of this new community of practice where the emphasis is on communication with an audience.

Many students in this study referred to the audience in their writing process and explained that they took into account their audience's knowledge and preferences. More specifically, they pointed out that they pay much attention to meeting the expectations of their direct evaluator – their lecturers and supervisors. Some students initially were not aware that they should be picturing their audience and as a result, failed to meet the lecturer's expectations. They were aware that when they first arrived, much of their time was spent learning and understanding how to make their assignments make sense to their audience:

When I started writing, particularly in the beginning, I rarely considered my audience. Instead, I just wrote what I wanted to convey. I never considered who would read it, what they would know about my subject and what information they would like to receive from my assignments. However, after a period of writing and participating in some writing training, I realized the need to consider readers during the writing process. I have to presume that readers do not have background knowledge of what I write. Hence, I will pay more attention to making my paper more interesting, understandable, and logical.

Wenyi, Education School

The importance of audience was conveyed to students in two ways: those who were required to give a presentation before writing an assignment were put in a position of having an actual audience in front of them. For others, an initial tutorial with their lecturer or supervisor about the topic and the structure of the assignments, conveyed to them the idea that they were writing for that person. More specifically, presentation to peers before writing the assignment gives students the opportunity to clarify their ideas and get feedback from peers and lecturers, so as to make supplements and adjustments when finishing the assignment. For instance, Yawen pointed out that when she gives a presentation, she always considers peers and lecturers as her audience:

When I make a presentation, I have to pay more attention to how to make peers and lecturers clearly understand the background, arguments, structure and conclusion of my assignments, so as to get their feedback and advice. When I write the assignments, I will consider their suggestions and write the assignment more clearly and logically. Through this step, I understand that it is important to consider the reader in writing. Also, I will

consider what others want to read from my assignments, combined with what I want to express, to make the assignments more meaningful.

Yawen, Business

Based on the above quotes, it can be seen that students recognized the importance of interacting with lecturers and peers before starting to write the assignment. These interactions not only helped them to think more clearly but also improved their written assignment by incorporating the suggestions of others. When asked about what kind of feedback they found the most helpful during the presentation or tutorial, students stated that all the suggestions and advice were helpful. Feedback makes Chinese PGT students more aware of their strengths and weaknesses so that they can improve accordingly. For example, interviewees mentioned that lecturers and peers gave them suggestions that helped with the structure of the assignment and supervisors recommended literature that helped improve the content of their writing:

My supervisor will be the final evaluator who reads my assignment and grades me. Therefore, it is essential to get their advice before writing. I will also apply their recommended material to my assignments. My classmates may not know much about the topic I write about, so they will ask me questions from the of the audiences' perspective after the presentation, which helps me better organize my opinions and arguments in the assignment.

Zetong, Business

The above quotes illustrating the relational aspect of writing also shows how their perception of themselves as writers evolves. They begin to position themselves in the social context of writing and to understand the relations between academic writing and the constitution of themselves as writers. Students' experiences indicate that as members of a new academic community, they had to learn new modes of discourse and develop fresh and evolving conceptions of themselves as writers (Leedham, 2014). Likewise, when talking about their perception of the evaluators of their writing, some participants indicated that they had gone through a transition from being blind to the evaluators and readers to actively involving their supervisors' and peers' perceptions in their writing.

Students can be seen engaging in multiple levels of audience awareness in their writing

practices. Their crucial audience is generally the evaluators of their writing, their lecturers or supervisors. However, group members or classmates can also be an audience. In addition, some students were aiming to write for publication (mainly PhD students), so their imaginary audience included the reviewers of their journal manuscript or conference proposal. However, overall, the most important audience was usually the lecturer/supervisor and meeting their expectations and requirements was the main driver in drafting the content of their assignment. As Guilian put it:

In order to meet my supervisor's expectations, I always keep them as the audience in mind when I am writing assignments. For example, I need to show I understand the assignment given and I have read the assigned material before writing. In some assignments, I should illustrate my research with tables and dendrograms.

Guilian, Education

Supervisors were seen as having expectations not only at the level of content but at the level of presentation, as Jiaqian explains:

I learned to use academic vocabulary and the assigned academic format when I study in the UK. Just like I need to write up a reference list in the way specified by the supervisor. For instance, I now use Harvard Style Referencing more often. And I should work hard on my assignments and spend time making them as good as possible, including considerable time making the format clearer and revising several times. In order to let the supervisor understand my arguments and expressions more clearly.

Jiaqian, Business School

As discussed above, picturing their audience can encourage students to take assignment writing more seriously. However, there is a paradox: on the one hand, students understand that they are expected to express their views. On the other hand, the excessive emphasis on the requirements of the evaluators and meeting the supervisors' expectations in order to get high marks, means that sometimes students will hide their true views.

Interviewing students from two different departments reveals disciplinary variations in writing practices and expectations. Students studying business are engaged in formulas and straightforward explanations and are therefore more concerned about correct results and how

to present their work to the audience in a straightforward manner. Some students were told not to write too much because it demonstrating their knowledge and understanding of the formulas and presenting correct answers was enough. In other words, what is valued in writing different not only between China and the UK but between disciplines.

Picturing the audience is a significant aspect of understanding social interactions in these participants' writing experiences. For most participants, their lecturers/supervisors are their main audience and therefore, students try to understand and take into account their supervisors' expectations. The process of communicating with their supervisors and revising assignments according to supervisors' comments and feedback was therefore a central aspect of their experience.

6.3 Relationship between supervisors and students

Students were aware of grappling not only with expectations around writing but also around social interactions. Their politeness strategies were not easy to translate into this different context, which made it easier to engage with other Chinese people. Understanding the impact of students' communication patterns with their supervisors and peers is an important aspect of their writing experience.

In the academic writing environment in the UK, knowing politeness conventions is critical for Chinese students. Conversely, the fear of causing offense or being seen as rude can be a significant barrier for Chinese students. Most participants in this research highlighted the importance for them of coming across as polite and behaving appropriately with their lecturers and supervisors. Their first-hand accounts therefore provide valuable insights for understanding how Chinese PGT students navigated social relations when learning to participate in the writing practices of their discipline.

Some participants reported that Chinese students treated teachers with great respect and were very worried about offending supervisors during their interactions due to a combination of their unfamiliarity with British culture and a lack of confidence in their English ability:

At the beginning of my postgraduate study, I felt reluctant to communicate with my supervisor because I was anxious and concerned that my actions or language may offend them.

For some participants, their uncertainty about being polite was simply due to their small linguistic repertoire: a lack of appropriate polite words and phrases. Xiaocao mentioned that people pay great attention to polite expressions in communication in China but these fixed expressions cannot be directly translated into English. Thus, the lack of proper vocabulary or phrases affects becomes another barrier to overcome when communicating with people in the UK academic environment.

Some participants in this study noticed that due to the asymmetric power relations between lecturers and students, which therefore require more complex politeness strategies, when Chinese students encounter problems, they often will tend to discuss them with their classmates rather than ask their lecturers for advice. This undoubtedly affects their ability to communicate with and get help from the lecturers, as Yuxin explains:

I study in education, and I clearly understand that international students' academic success to a great extent depends on their interaction with their supervisors. However, I am still always concerned about offending my supervisors because I am not familiar with the appropriate way of communicating, and sometimes I feel reluctant to bother them with very easy or stupid questions.

Yuxin, Education

Such statements are consistent with Yan and Berliner's (2009) research, which found that Chinese overseas students avoid or at least speak less to their advisors than to peers. Participants in this study claimed that interactions with their lecturers were fraught with the fear of offending them. Yet the lack of communication with lecturers also hinders students in terms of improving their English writing ability and skills and therefore, from reaching learning goals and meeting writing expectations.

Moreover, the power dynamics between supervisors and students imposed an additional pressure: students wanted to know the supervisor's preferences and complete the assignments accordingly but at the same time, found it difficult to ask directly. As the quote below

illustrates, resolving the communication barrier and building a relationship with the supervisor, was an important strategy in becoming a more confident writer:

At first, I was embarrassed to discuss with my supervisor and ask for help, but after a period of time, I gradually mastered the skills of communicating with my supervisor, which was very helpful to me. I was trying to build a good relationship with my supervisor. I tried to show the supervisor that although I was not very good at writing at first, I would spare no effort to learn to improve my writing skills and techniques.

Mingchao, Business

According to Lea and Street (2006), writing practices are not only associated with different subject areas and disciplines but also with power relations. Hence, when Chinese students study in the UK, they need to not only get to grips with the expectations of their discipline but also with the power dynamics of their Masters programmes.

From the above discussion it can be seen that many students are worried that they will come across as rude or cause offense when interacting with their supervisors due to ignorance about politeness norms operating in this context and a lack of politeness phrases in English. In other words, their cultural background and lack of confidence in the English language create a challenge in their interactions. Yet these behaviors hinder their development since oral communication is a vital part of participating in this academic practice. In addition, reticence to approach lecturers means that students may fail to get timely and effective feedback and suggestions which will make it more difficult for these students to adapt to the UK writing community.

6.4 Relationship between peers and classmates

As discussed in the previous section, for some participants, the power relationship with their tutors makes them reluctant to communicate for fear of offense or wasting the tutor's time. I indicated that students found it easier to seek peer support. However, interviewees also discussed the challenge of building good social relationships with their peers.

Participants spoke extensively about the discussions they had with their classmates during the

writing process regarding the topic, structure and materials they used. Students freely gave suggestions to each other to help them improve the assignments they wrote. However, some students were cautious about giving feedback because they worried about not giving appropriate or valuable responses to their peers' writing:

When a classmate gives a presentation and asks us to advice on his outline, I am often afraid to say what I think. And if a classmate asks me to read his assignment before submitting it to the supervisor, and help check grammar and vocabulary, it makes me feel stressed because I'm worried that I'm making worthless or even wrong advice.

Ailin, Education

Nevertheless, over a period of time, as students become accustomed to the peer review model, they learn how to give valuable advice politely. They are encouraged by the recognition of how valuable peer feedback can be for their own writing. As Bohua put it:

According to my supervisor's guidance and by learning from other students, I gradually got used to expressing my perspectives on other students' assignments. And the feedback I received from peers really helps me revise and improve the quality of my assignments.

Bohua, Business

The above statement again illustrates how concerned students are with their manners and how insecure they can feel about their behavior, which undermines their academic communication with classmates. However, as the above quote illustrates, once Chinese PGT students become familiar with reviewing peers' writing critically, they are able to receive and deliver valuable feedback from and to their peers.

Writing focussed communication between students occurs more often when working together on group assignments. Therefore, exploring how students cooperate in group writing and how they deal with difficult tasks, can shed light on the complexities of social relationship building in the writing process. Students studying business are given different tasks within group projects, including searching for information and resources, completing group assignments, making PowerPoints and presenting in class. Completing the group assignment is a vital part of the project. Group members will discuss the structure and content of the assignments and

divide the work to complete the task together. Some participants claimed that they preferred group projects rather than completing assignments by themselves, as they valued the opportunity to improve their ability to cooperate and enjoyed bringing together everyone's different ideas. They felt that the result was invariably higher quality than if they had completed the assignment on their own. At the same time, many students were uncomfortable with the frictions and conflicts that could arise in group tasks, which they saw as reducing writing efficiency and making it difficult to complete the assignment in a way that satisfied everyone. More specifically, writing in groups generated challenges such as how to assign work, how to schedule the process of group writing and how to deal with social conflicts.

According to Qing, collaborative writing has many advantages but also brings many contradictions and conflicts:

Collaborative assignments can combine the expertise and skills of several people to make the writing more comprehensive. In addition, students providing feedback to each other could help them speed up the writing process and improve the quality of writing. However, different students have their understanding of the topic, and different writing styles and presentations, which can cause conflicts and inconsistencies among group members.

Qing, Business

Many Chinese students reported that in the context of group cooperation, they found communicating with their Chinese peers rather than non-Chinese peers. They suggested that students from non-Chinese cultures tended to negotiate writing in different ways, which created barriers in communication and affected the progress of writing. At the same time, they acknowledged that working with international students allowed them to develop their communication skills and understand more about western mindsets:

When I first started group writing, I preferred to be in a group with Chinese students. However, after becoming familiar with the English writing mode, I preferred to work with international students to complete the assignments. Because I went to the UK to study, I want to acquire more about foreign cultures and improve my skills in communicating and cooperating with different people. Even though this makes the assignments harder to complete, I can learn more from it.

Ruimeng, Business

This excerpt illustrates some of the difficulties – both cultural and linguistic - that Chinese students face when required to work with L1 students. An important aspect of participation in the community of practice is developing good communication skills and becoming familiar with the constructs of group writing to successfully solve conflicts and complete the assignments with non -Chinese peers.

According to Carson and Nelson (1996), Asian students are generally reluctant to criticise the work of others, which reinforces the belief that Asian students will always seek group harmony. Many studies have concluded that Chinese students like to maintain a pleasant team atmosphere and are reluctant to provoke conflict or confrontation (Li and Zhu, 2013). My data shows that once Chinese students are familiar with the process of group assignments and feel confident with their English, they are often able and willing to put forward different views and constructive criticism. Qing describes her journey from listening to participating more fully:

When I first started working with international students, most of the time I was listening to their thoughts and suggestions on the assignments. I was worried that my poor English would cause misunderstandings, or that I wasted everyone's time by putting forward wrong ideas. Nevertheless, after teaming up with international students a few times, I can gradually integrate into the discussion, and I can confidently point out my constructive suggestions and ideas.

Qing, Business school

Nevertheless, the transition from being on the margins of the group to being more fully involved is also fraught with challenges:

I am eager to put forward my suggestions and would like to discuss with group members. However, I am afraid that criticizing other people's opinions can make others feel offended, which is not conducive to building strong relationships with peers.

Mingchao, Business

Scheduling a time to meet and the challenges of distributing the tasks evenly in group writing can also cause dissatisfaction and conflict:

Each group member has an area of expertise, so assigning tasks with everyone's unique situation in mind is necessary. But occasionally, there is an unfair distribution of tasks.

Additionally, due to the large number of groups, it is not easy for everyone to gather together. Hence, conflicts are also prone to occur in terms of appointment time.

Jiaqian, Business

Thus, despite the many challenges in building good social relationships with their peers and participating in group writing, these students show considerable determination to integrate themselves into the writing environment and work with group members to complete the assignments. Once they are more familiar with the group writing model, they cease to be marginal members and are able to participate more fully, expressing their opinions and giving feedback to other students. Chinese students' experiences indicate that although navigating social relationships makes them feel anxious and constrained, they are able to negotiate their roles and responsibilities in the progress of writing, under the guidance of lecturers and with the help of their peers. Strategies to help Chinese PGT students manage their relationships with lecturers and peers will be addressed more fully in Chapter 8.

6.5 Relationship Between Families and Students

In addition to communication with tutors and peers, the students' home environment and contact with family members also exert an impact on their postgraduate studies while studying in the UK. In addition to interaction with tutors and peers which can improve their academic performance, support from family is equally important. As noted by some students, communication with family members is more relaxing than that with tutors and peers. Firstly, participants identify the emotional support from their families as contributing significantly to their academic achievement. Secondly, in a practical sense, students report that their family members often provide proofreading before they submit their assignments.

The emotional support from family members enhances participants' psychological well-being when they study in the UK. Ruimeng and Yaling spoke of how talking to their family members made them feel warm and therefore more motivated and productive in their studies:

Although my parents do not give me academic advice, they give me emotional support. A good mood helps me to be more efficient and confident in my studies and life.

Ruimeng, Business

Although I can't get academic advice and proofreading from my families, I can get emotional support from talking to them. Parental motivation makes me work harder and more determined, and my parents provide proper motivation to help me become more persistent and productive in my studies. Hence, to some extent, my study achievements depend on how my parents motivate me.

Yaling, Education

In addition to providing social and emotional support such as advice, encouragement, care and compassion, family members also often provide the material support to enable them to focus on their studies. Indeed, most Chinese students rely on their parents for financial support:

I am very grateful to my parents for providing me with such a great deal of financial support to come to the UK to study. Whether it was during my IELTS training and exams before coming to the UK, or during my postgraduate studies in the UK, my parents provided me with great support both psychologically and financially.

Yajing, Education

In the case of Jiaqian, her sister took on more family responsibilities while Jiaqian was abroad, which enabled her to focus on completing her studies without worrying about her parents. In summary, family members provide both emotional and financial support, which helps students to adjust to their new circumstances and motivates them to overcome the challenges of studying in the UK. In addition, some have family members who can also provide proofreading. For instance, Tianqi's boyfriend has a PhD in biology from a UK university and so has been able to help Tianqi by proofreading her assignments:

My boyfriend can't give advice on the content of the assignments, but he can read my assignment before I submit it and helps me point out poor expressions and logic, as well as find many grammar and word choice problems.

Tianqi, Business

While it is clear that for many students, family members provide important emotional, financial and practical support, communication with family members can also be a hindrance to a student's studies. For example, Zijie's boyfriend is a native English speaker and can therefore help her with proofreading to a great extent. However, because he knows Zijie's major well, he

often disagrees with her on the content or perspectives she puts in her assignments. His input undermines Zijie's confidence in her ability to write assignments and also worries about the ethical issues. Indeed, after a while, she stopped asking her boyfriend to proofread for her, and instead turned to her tutor and classmates for guidance and feedback:

Compared with my boyfriend, my tutor is more authoritative and professional and can give me more objective advice and suggestions and guide me to improve my assignments step by step, so I prefer to seek help from my tutor. Although sometimes it is very stressful, I will get very useful advice to complete my assignments better.

Zijie, Business

Thus, while students are more relaxed with their families than with their tutors and peers, most recognize that in terms of their participation in this new academic community, they gain more knowledge from their tutors and peers, which helps them integrate better into their study environment in the UK.

6.6 Summary

The analysis of this research is based on the theoretical lens that views writing as a social practice, imbued with different relationships (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Gee, 1992). In order to meet writing requirements of a new community of practice, social relationships with lecturers, supervisors and peers have to be negotiated. Participating in the academic discourse and practices, such as presentations and group tasks, facilitates their better integration into the new writing environment.

This chapter has discussed the social relationships that revolve around and underpin writing practices in a UK university. Participants in this study have complex experiences of navigating social connections when engaged in the process of developing written assignments. Chinese students find ways of dealing with a variety of social relationships, recognizing that such relationships are an important part of adapting to the new writing community. Firstly, picturing their audience is a concrete idea that most participants embrace and that improves their writing practice. Becoming more familiar with the politeness conventions in this new community and feeling more confident about not offending people inadvertently, are also crucial in the writing

process. As students become more familiar with academic writing and as they build good relationships with peers, their ability to cooperate improves and they are also able to give and receive from peers.

Chapter 7: Academic Writing Challenges from the Perspective of Chinese PGT Students

7.1 Introduction

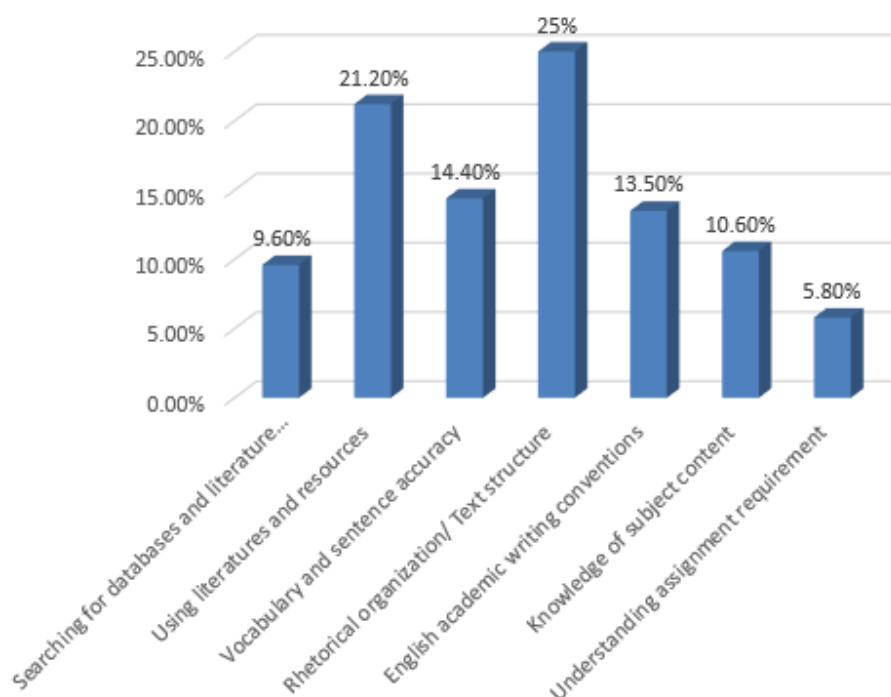
Chapter 5 examined the cultural differences between the UK and China in relation to writing styles, tutor expectations and assessment criteria, while Chapter 6 explored the social relationships that Chinese PGT students must navigate in order to participate in their academic community of practice. These discussions illustrated that adapting to UK academic writing involves not only linguistic demands but also social and cultural challenges, including issues of politeness and interactional norms. Building on this foundation, the present chapter focuses specifically on the academic writing challenges identified by Chinese PGT students themselves. Although linguistic difficulties—particularly in vocabulary and grammar—remain important, the analysis here emphasises the non-linguistic dimensions of writing, such as rhetorical organisation, critical engagement with sources, disciplinary knowledge and academic conventions.

Using thematic analysis, this chapter investigates the challenges students reported in integrating and using literature, constructing arguments and meeting disciplinary expectations. The analytic procedures follow those used in Chapter 6 but place greater emphasis on deriving themes from students' descriptions of their writing struggles, thereby revealing how these challenges shape their learning processes and academic performance. The findings indicate that Chinese PGT students face a wide range of difficulties, including rhetorical structure, use of academic sources, critical thinking, coherence and cohesion, and familiarity with English academic writing conventions.

Although many students have some exposure to English writing during their undergraduate studies in China, most remain unfamiliar with the requirements of English academic writing at postgraduate level (Clark and Gu, 2021). Investigating their experiences is therefore essential for understanding how they negotiate these expectations and what forms of support may

enhance their academic development. Drawing on data from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, this chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of the academic writing challenges encountered by Chinese PGT students in a UK university.

A total of 160 questionnaires were distributed, with 104 valid ones returned, a total recovery rate of 91.25%. According to the questionnaires, the seven most difficult aspects of academic writing for Chinese PGT students in the UK university are illustrated in Histogram 7.1.



Histogram 7.1: The most difficult aspects of academic writing

As can be seen in Histogram 7.2, 25% of participants think that rhetorical organization/ text structure is the most important and difficult aspect of academic writing. Using literature and resources is the second most difficult aspect. By contrast, only 5.8% reported that understanding assignment requirements was the most difficult aspect of academic writing. These data suggest that the difficulties students encounter in new academic environments are not only technical, but also relate to their integration into the new academic community and adaptation to new social practices. This is in line with Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of 'legitimate peripheral participation'. 25% of students identified rhetorical organisation and text structure as the most difficult aspects, suggesting that they were attempting to understand and adopt the specific ways

and conventions of academic writing in the UK. specific approaches and conventions of academic writing. This is not only a technical issue, but also an adaptation of cultural and social practices. Difficulties in using literature and resources (21.20 per cent) and subject content knowledge (10.60 per cent) suggest that the problems students encountered in academic writing were not only linguistic, but also related to how to use and integrate academic resources effectively and how to communicate subject content accurately in their writing. This requires students to have a high level of academic literacy, including critical reading and writing skills. From an academic literacies perspective (Lea and Street, 1998), these challenges can be understood as part of the process of learning to navigate the discourses and practices of the academic community. Chinese PGT students need to develop an understanding of the tacit knowledge and conventions that underpin academic writing in their discipline. This chapter will use the responses to the questionnaire combined with the semi-structured interviews and student assignments to explore the different aspects of students' writing difficulties.

7.2 Difficulties with vocabulary and sentence accuracy

Difficulty in using accurate vocabulary and sentences and correct grammar are common issues facing Chinese international students (Tsai, 2022). According to Sawir (2005), university tutors in the UK identify basic language skills as needing improvement. Ye and Liu (2013) suggest that one reason may be that in China, English language teaching focuses on English for general purposes (EGP) rather than for academic purposes (EAP), which does not give students enough opportunities to acquire and practice academic vocabulary and sentences. Insufficient vocabulary has also been found to be a major obstacle for international students to improve their English academic writing (Elturki, 2019).

In the questionnaire, 14.4% of the participants responded that vocabulary and sentence accuracy was the most difficult part of English academic writing. Interviewees also stated that they had difficulty using academic vocabulary. For example, Qing told me:

In the process of writing in English, finding the appropriate vocabulary brings me many troubles. I don't know how to choose the right words. Especially in academic writing, it is very difficult to choose and use academic vocabulary to present my arguments.

Difficulties in vocabulary choice in English academic writing can be seen as a specific challenge encountered by Chinese students in their attempts to adapt and integrate in a new academic community. For example, Qing faced not only the technical problem of vocabulary choice, but also how to find a suitable way to express his academic views in a new socio-cultural environment. Qing needed to acquire and use academic vocabulary to accurately express his arguments when he was writing academically in English. This requires not only a high level of language skills, but also an understanding and mastery of specific norms and conventions in academic writing. This process can be seen as a gradual shift from "legitimate peripheral participation" to "core participation", and the improvement of academic writing ability is not only dependent on the improvement of language skills, but also on the improvement of the language skills of the Chinese students. The enhancement of academic writing ability is not only dependent on the improvement of language skills, but also requires students' continuous practice and adaptation in academic culture and norms.

Some students felt that they used only simple words in writing because they depended heavily on the vocabulary they learned when studying in China and it took time for them to acquire more academic and specialised vocabulary from lectures and reading the literature. An example of this was given by Zhihao:

At the beginning of writing an assignment, I always choose easy and simple vocabulary that I learned at the university in China, whereas academic vocabulary is foreign to me. Therefore, it is very difficult for me to find accurate vocabulary and write according to academic standards.

Zhihao, Business

Chinese students' difficulties with English stem from a learning environment in which the main features are memorisation and rote learning so although students may have memorized a significant bank of English vocabulary, they will have had little practice in using it in real life interactions. As Xuehui explains:

Although I memorized many vocabularies when I studied in China, because I did not use

them frequently, I forgot them quickly. Therefore, I need to take much time to pick them up when I study in the UK.

Xuehui, Education

There are also instances where Chinese students use a word which in the academic setting, has a very specific meaning and this can lead to misunderstandings in written assignments. For example, Ailin often used the word 'prove' in her assignments as follows:

iii. Review of existing literature and research on the topic

- L2 Learning Through Digital Gaming

In this part, the author uses some real-life examples to **prove** that second language acquisition can be achieved through digital games. First of all, we studied that extra English activities which are enjoyed among 86 Swedish youths, aged 11-12, preferring digital games than watching TV or listening to music (Sylvén and Sundqvist, 2012).

She gradually came to realise that she needed to be very careful with this word:

When I use 'This study proves' in my assignment, it sounds like this study shows beyond doubt, which suggests that my knowledge of this study is limited. Because the word 'prove' is decisive and absolute. It means that something has been proven beyond doubt."

Ailin, Education

In social research, few studies offer conclusions that are completely free of doubt. Therefore, to write that a study proves something is to expose one's lack of critical thinking. This kind of language knowledge can only be learnt through engaging in particular forms of academic writing. Students will find that vocabulary they have learnt in a Chinese context is not always appropriate in their written assignments.

Jiaqian who studies business is aware that there are differences between academic vocabulary and spoken vocabulary and finds this challenging:

When I write in English, my priority is how to express a complete thought. I don't have the consciousness and energy to choose vocabulary. I use whatever vocabulary I think of during the writing process. Sometimes, to avoid spelling and usage mistakes, I tend to

choose the words I am familiar with. But sometimes the feedback from my tutor indicates that the vocabulary I choose is too colloquial. For example, I need to use however or regardless rather than anyway when I write up my assignments.

Jiaqian, Business

This quote illustrates that in order to engage in academic writing, students have to master several aspects of writing, including the basic building blocks of vocabulary. Though they may come with a significant bank of vocabulary, they learn that much of this vocabulary will be too informal for use in written assignments. Hence, students have to spend some time acquiring and learning how to use phrases and terminology that is specific to the UK academic context. Grammar is also an area of difficulty they encounter in writing, which influences sentence accuracy and ultimately, meaning. Again, due to the language environment, students will be trained in accuracy rather than fluency so that it is challenging to apply their grammatical knowledge to extended written work.

For instance, they are not always sure which is the right tense to use in an academic assignment:

When I write in English, especially in the literature review, findings, and discussion chapter, I feel confused about which tense I should use.

YaJing, Education

Hongxin, a student in business, compared the use of tenses, claiming that this was one of the principal differences between English and Chinese:

Present tense, past tense and past perfect always make me feel confused. In my opinion, this is due to native language interference. For example, Chinese uses some fixed words, such as “le”, “guo”, “hui”, “yijing”. “zhengzai”, “yao” and other specific words to reflect the time state of the completion of a thing. On the contrary, in English, it does not reflect time states with a specific word but uses certain verbs. Thus, it is important to master the changing law of verbs in different tenses, in order to grasp the key point of tense change.

Hongxin, Business

As Hongxin points out, in Chinese, specific words are placed before or after the verb to express tense, whereas English uses different variations of the verb to express tense. Hongxin discovered this through trial and error and through her own observations. But perhaps this is an

area that could be highlighted for students from China.

Differences in Chinese and English expression habits also cause difficulties for Chinese students. For example, whereas Chinese basically uses the active voice, in English, the passive voice is used, particularly in academic texts. According to Tianqi:

After I read a lot of English literature and tried to learn from them, I noticed that the passive voice could help me express myself more clearly when I write in English.

Tianqi, Business

As many participants reflected, they will have studied English grammar for many years so that they may have a good understanding of grammar but not necessarily the ability to use this knowledge. In addition, they are accustomed to thinking in Chinese, expressing themselves in Chinese which they then try to translate and as a result, construct sentences that do not conform to English grammar rules. Only by recognising the impact of mother tongue interference on English learning can we effectively improve the English language use of Chinese students.

From what has been discussed, there are many reasons for the grammatical difficulties Chinese students encounter in English academic writing. Firstly, the mother tongue is deeply ingrained in the brain, which often interferes with Chinese students being able to use learning and produce correct and authentic English (Wei et al., 2023). Students are also impacted by their own Chinese thinking and expressive habits and by the differences between the grammatical rules of their mother tongue and those of English (Liu, 2011). Furthermore, writing is a skill that requires constant practice but in China, students have little opportunity for this kind of practice, because the high stakes examinations require memorization and rote learning (Lan, 2015). Thus, most Chinese students do not have the opportunity to practice their writing skills let alone receive feedback that supports them to develop their writing (Ibid.). Many students report that 'some language mistakes do not impede communication' (Ailin, Education school) but they still need to improve their presentation skills in order to make their assignments more fluent and achieve higher scores (Hou, 2017).

7.3 Difficulties with rhetorical organization

As shown in Histogram 7.1, 25% of respondents to the survey considered rhetorical organization and text structure as the most challenging of all aspects of academic writing. Many of my interviewees stated that the structure of the assignment made them feel confused when they had to write their first assignments. One reason for this difficulty might be that different cultures shape different ways of thinking. This is to say a writing pattern reflects a thinking pattern, which is impacted by the language spoken as the first language. Contrastive rhetoric is a field of research that explores these differences.

Social practice theory emphasises that learning and writing are practical activities embedded in a particular socio-cultural context rather than isolated cognitive tasks. In this theoretical perspective, students from different cultures enter new academic environments with different writing practices, and they need to learn and adapt to new writing norms and expectations. Chinese writing usually adopts an indirect organisational style, whereas English academic writing emphasises directness and clear structure. This difference in culture and writing style makes it challenging for Chinese students to adapt to Western academic writing. For Chinese students, they need to learn and adapt to the new rhetorical organisation by engaging in academic writing practices, so that they can gradually integrate into the new academic community and change the fixed ways of writing in Chinese English writing, such as the "start-containment-transition-conclusion" structure. The rhetorical organisational difficulties encountered by Chinese PGT students in their academic writing at UK universities are not only a matter of language skills, but also a process of socio-cultural adaptation and academic literacy development.

Contrastive rhetoric research demonstrates that there are differences in the rhetorical organization of ideas in different languages. For example, texts written in Chinese are characterized by indirect organization and use an 'indirect' and implicit style (Kaplan, 1966). Comparisons between Chinese and English academic writing suggest that Chinese writers are inclined to lay emphasis on indirectness in their academic writing. This practice contrasts with the rhetorical organization in Western educational contexts which values directness in academic

discourse (Lan, 2015).

The Chinese “indirect” writing style that Kaplan (1966) refers to, stems from the classical assignment format used in Chinese imperial examinations, called *ba-gu-wen* (eight-legged assignment). Although abolished in 1901, this kind of literary style still influences some people’s writing styles (Kaplan, 1966). Cai (1993) sees the part-for-part structure in English assignments written by Chinese students as similar to the *ba-gu-wen* structure. *Ba-gu-wen* stipulates a strict writing style, whereas the writing structure in Western countries gives students more opportunities to write critically (Mohan and Lo, 1985). Hence, to some extent, the traditional Chinese writing style shapes some of the challenges students meet when studying in English-speaking universities (Cai, 1993).

Some researchers believe that the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* structure in the Chinese language also explains why students prefer an indirect writing style (Connor, 1996). “*Qi*” always introduces the situation rather than explaining the statement; “*cheng*” clarifies the writer’s viewpoint and arguments; “*zhuan*” is the indirection part of the assignment as it always turns to another viewpoint which is not directly connected to the major theme and the final part, “*he*” is equivalent to the conclusion part in the western rhetorical style. This model differs from the western situation-problem-solution-evaluation schema, leading Mohan and Lo (1985) to conclude that Chinese students’ issues with rhetorical organization are mainly correlated with their previous writing and learning practices.

Guilian, for instance, puts it as follows:

When I write assignments in Chinese, I feel that I write very logically and clearly. When I was preparing for the IELTS test, I found many differences in the structure of English writing and Chinese writing. After coming to the UK, I found that the structure of the English assignment was unfamiliar to me.

Guilian, Education

Apart from differences in culture and thinking patterns, Chinese teachers concentrate their instructional efforts on grammar rather than on organization, which can also explain students’ difficulties with rhetorical organization in their written assignments. Shaoming compares the

teaching style of Chinese teachers with that of British teachers in university and the relative importance of written assignments:

The goal of English learning in China is to get a high score in the exam, so the teacher pays more attention to grammar and vocabulary, as writing is only a small part of the English text and we should, just like CET-4 and CET-6 exam. But in the UK, English writing ability is very important in each subject, so the tutor pays more attention to telling us how to express our opinions through writing. Therefore, after I came to the UK, I learned a lot about how to structure the assignment to make it more logical and clearer.

Shaoming, Business School

Not all participants struggled with rhetorical organization. Firstly, through preparing for and having to pass the IELTS test, they had learnt how to structure an English assignment, so they had mastered the English writing mode to some extent before coming to the UK:

When preparing for the IELTS test, we were asked to practice writing using the IELTS requirements. My teacher used to study in the UK, and she taught us a lot of British academic assignment writing skills and methods, which helped me a lot. Therefore, before I came to the UK, I understood the structure and framework of English academic writing. I think IELTS training or pre-sessional courses before postgraduate study are very vital and useful.

Jinghan, Business

Tianyuan identified that the issue is not that Chinese students lack the ability to write academically in English but rather, that they have not had the opportunity to learn and practice:

Now many teachers in China also recommend that students write in a direct mode, but we do not have native writing samples to imitate and fail to control context and genre. When I study in the UK, tutors give us some examples before writing the assignment. It helps us to have a more intuitive understanding of the requirements and evaluation criteria of UK academic writing.

Tianyuan, Education school

It can be inferred from the above that according to many Chinese teachers pay less attention to the rhetorical organization of writing so that students have little experience of writing in their first language. Nonetheless, after some training and practice, students can overcome those difficulties and master the academic writing skills necessary to complete their written

assignments in the UK university context.

7.4 Difficulties with finding sources

Finding and using sources is another challenge facing Chinese students when they write in English and relates to the freedom and autonomy discussed in Chapter 5. As illustrated in Histogram 7.1, 9.6% of students thought that finding literature and resources has been the most difficult aspect of English writing. For Chinese PGT students, finding and using resources is not only a technical issue, but also a process of adaptation to cultural and social practices. This section combines the survey results with the interviews to explore this aspect in more depth.

Students were very aware of the importance of reading and citing literature in English academic writing:

In addition to the references provided by the tutor, we also had to find relevant literature to support our arguments when completing the assignment. When writing an assignment, it is necessary to discuss and analyze a large amount of literature in order to make the assignment more rigorous and persuasive.

Wenyi, Education School

However, finding the 'relevant' literature for the purposes of writing their assignment was a challenge, especially at the beginning:

In China, I used Baidu.com or Zhiwang.com to find sources, but when I came to the UK, I found that these two sites were not suitable for finding English literature. My tutor recommended Google Scholar, the school library and other search sites and taught us techniques such as searching by keywords or authors. Through constant practice and use, I am now able to find the literature and materials I need with ease.

Zixin, Business

Wenyi and Zixin's experiences showed that they needed to learn and adapt to new methods and techniques of finding resources in their new academic environment. In China, they were used to using Baidu and Zhi.com, but in the UK, these tools did not work and they needed to move to new resources such as Google Scholar, the school library, etc. Wenyi pointed out that when writing assignments, a large amount of literature needed to be discussed and analysed in order

to make the assignments more rigorous and convincing. This suggests that students need to have a high level of academic literacy and be able to effectively locate and use relevant literature to support their arguments. Zixin's experience shows his process in adapting to the new academic environment. He needed to learn new literature finding techniques and improve his skills through constant practice. This process not only improved his language skills, but also enhanced his academic literacy, enabling him to write more effectively academically.

Many students also said that they attended the free academic writing classes in their department and that the tutor was very patient, introducing them to a variety of software that was available to help them in their search. Other students learnt about finding articles and books by talking to their classmates:

In the academic writing course offered by the school, the tutor showed us how to find the books we needed on websites and in the library, and the tutor would even take us with her to the library and show us how to use the library facilities.

Yuxin, Education

The interaction between my classmates was also very helpful. When I couldn't find the literature, I would ask for help and learn from them. For example, my classmates recommended websites or apps such as ResearchGate, Researcher, etc., which helped me find or learn about the literature I was interested in through different means.

Bohua, Business

As discussed above, finding and using relevant sources is vital in academic writing. Students were aware of the significance of reading the relevant literature for their postgraduate study and more specifically, in order to complete their written assignments. Some students had difficulties searching for documents because they had never encountered websites such as Google Scholar when studying in China and were unfamiliar with the university library when they first came to the UK. However, once they had learnt how to search for materials, they became proficient in using these search tools and were able to find related literature more effectively.

7.5 Difficulties with using literature and resources

A further challenge reported by students concerns the use of literature and academic resources.

As shown in Histogram 7.1, 21.2% of respondents identified locating, interpreting and integrating sources as the most difficult aspect of academic writing. This difficulty reflects that source use is not merely a technical task but a socially situated practice embedded in academic culture. Whereas Chinese students are used to relying on textbooks and teacher-selected materials, the UK academic context requires independent searching, evaluating and synthesising of diverse sources, alongside strict adherence to citation conventions and academic integrity. Thus, students must not only master citation techniques but also adapt to the epistemological values of UK academia, which emphasise transparency, critical engagement and evidence-based argumentation. These challenges indicate that effective use of literature involves both technical and socio-cultural adaptation. This section therefore examines students' difficulties from two perspectives: avoiding plagiarism and engaging critically with sources to construct coherent academic arguments.

7.5.1 Plagiarism, Paraphrasing and Writing the Reference List

Results from the survey and interviews show that students were aware that attempting to pass off someone else's work as one's own is treated as a heinous crime in the academic community. However, avoiding plagiarism was identified by students as one of the most challenging factors in academic writing. Also, students are told that duplicate publication or self-plagiarism is another kind of plagiarism, which occurs when an author reuses substantial parts of his or her own published work without providing the appropriate references. This suggests that if people use the thoughts or writings of another person or use ideas which have been used before by themselves but without reference, they can be accused of plagiarising. This added to the anxiety of students.

As noted by Hongxin, Jiaqian and Yuxin, at the start of studying in the UK, they first needed to understand the concept of plagiarism:

When I study in China, I only knew that I could not copy and paste what others write, but I did not systematically grasp the meaning of plagiarism and master how to avoid it in the process of writing. After I came to the UK, I realized that in addition to directly copying other people's writing, incorrect references, quoting other people's views without

indicating the source, and even submitting two assignments with similar content would be accused of plagiarism.

Hongxin, Business

Although my teacher highlighted the importance of avoiding plagiarism when I was preparing for IELTS, and I would try to use different sentence patterns and vocabulary to express the same meaning, IELTS composition is a closed-book exam, which is much simpler than the postgraduate assignments. Thus, there is no need to quote literature, and plagiarism is not likely to occur. Therefore, it was not until I came to the UK that I recognized the significance of avoiding plagiarism and paid more attention to it.

Yuxin, Education

Once students have understood the definition of plagiarism, how to avoid it becomes another challenge. One of the most important skills needed in order to avoid being accused of plagiarism is paraphrasing. Many students pointed out that they struggled to fully retain the meaning of the original text when paraphrasing. For example, Shaoming said:

Paraphrasing was difficult for me, and I tried to replace the words with synonyms, or change the sentence structure, such as changing active sentences to passive ones. Nevertheless, over-paraphrasing is likely to change the meaning of the original text, whilst insufficient paraphrasing may be accused of plagiarism.

Shaoming, Business

Similarly, Guilian, also worried that in the paraphrasing process, she might change the original meaning:

Compared with indirect reference, namely, the way to paraphrase the original text, I prefer direct reference, that is, directly copying and pasting the original content. However, my tutor told me that it was not possible to use direct reference only in the assignment, so learning and mastering paraphrasing is a very vital skill.

Guilian, Education School

It is also clear from the student assignments that incorrect paraphrasing also puts the student at risk of being accused of plagiarism. For instance, the assignment below was submitted by Qing. It shows that inaccurate or insufficient paraphrasing of content from another article will still be highlighted as possible plagiarism due to the high textual match.

Executive summary

Digital marketing aims to market products or services using digital technologies on the internet, through mobile phone apps, display advertising, and any other digital mediums (Financial Times, 2017). It has transformed how businesses and organisations communicate with their audiences (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Moreover, digital marketing promotes long-term technological customer engagement through repeated customer interaction with online brand communication (Turban et al., 2016; Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Amazon, as a leading E-commerce organisation has been applying and

Amazon was founded by Jeff Bezos in Bellevue, Washington, in July 1994. It went live in 1995, and ever since, Amazon has systematically revolutionized the way people shop online (Investopedia, 2015). It is now considered as the world's largest online retailer. Amazon always strives to be the most customer-centric company by focusing on engaging with their customers in a personal, dynamic, and natural way across their contact centres and through mobile and email messaging (AWS, no date). Among the digital social networking is the key to allow Amazon to achieve customer engagement. Highly engaged customers buy more, promote more, and demonstrate more loyalty (Clarabridge, no date). According to Forrester (2007), engagement is the level of involvement, interaction, intimacy, and influence an individual has with a brand over time. This essay is to analyse and evaluate Amazon's current activities and technology application with selected theories of Owned, Paid, Earned media, and electronic-Word-of-mouth (E-WOM).

Qing, Business School

Students explained that it was particularly easy to lose or change the meaning of the original when encountering complicated sentences. For many Chinese students, their first encounter with professional literature was after coming to the UK, preparing for IELTS or in their pre-sessional courses. Unlike authors of textbooks, professional literature tended to involve long and complex sentences, which sometimes need to be read many times to correctly understand:

When I read the literature, some authors write in a simple and clear way, whilst some like to use long and complex sentence patterns, and sometimes I am very worried that I paraphrase their opinions wrongly due to my own wrong understanding. Therefore, I need to be very careful to confirm repeatedly, and sometimes I will also ask my classmates to help check to prevent myself from misunderstanding the original text or paraphrasing wrongly.

Lixiang, Education

Regarding literature citation, students also need to learn to use specific citation formats. For instance, Yawen claimed:

The tutor asked us to use the Harvard Referencing style in our assignments. In the beginning, when I am not familiar with it, I often needed to consult how to mark the literature correctly in the assignment and the references list. Later, I also learned to use EndNote and Mendeley to directly insert the literature, which can save a lot of time and ensure the accuracy of using the literature format.

Yawen, Business

Although students checked their work carefully before submitting, some minor technical referencing errors still occurred. For example, Ailin omitted to italicize the journal title in the full reference list:

Reinhardt, J., & Sykes, J.M. (2014). Special Issue Commentary: Digital Game Activity
in L2 Teaching and Learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 18(2), p.2–8.

Ailin, Education

As aforementioned, many Chinese students are unfamiliar with different types of plagiarism when they first come to the UK. Apart from copying and pasting them directly, incorrect copying, absence of attribution, and duplication of passages they may have included in previous assignments on different courses will also be judged as plagiarism. To avoid plagiarism, students were aware of needing to master the skills of paraphrasing the opinion of the original author in the appropriate language without changing the meaning, rather than just using synonym replacement. After a period of adaptation and continuous improvement of their writing skills and with the help of software like EndNote and Mendeley to manage the literature, students were able to overcome these challenges.

7.5.2 Critical thinking and argument development

Critical thinking is another key challenge faced by Chinese students in academic writing. Difficulties in critical writing are linked to different perspectives, including cultural value, subject content and English language proficiency (Janks, 2009). Critical thinking requires people to see both sides of an issue, laying emphasis on the evidence that disconfirms their ideas, constantly reviewing all the evidence and then deducing and inferring conclusions

(O'Reilly et al., 2022). In the UK university, students are expected to be critical in their academic writing. However, Chinese students often find it difficult to write critically given the belief in China that published literature is written by experts and is therefore authoritative and cannot be challenged. Thus, impacted by the learning habits of Chinese students and the learning environment in China, conducting critical thinking and argumentative writing represents a challenge for Chinese PGT students.

Most participants in this study did not recognize the importance of critical thinking in academic writing before they came to the UK for postgraduate study, as stated by Ailing:

Although I will also think about what I read while studying in China, it differs from the critical thinking emphasized by British tutors. I now realise that only by thinking critically about the different views I read can I clearly write a logical assignment that accords with my own views.

Ailing, Education School

However, critical thinking is not easy for Chinese students, who need to read much relevant literature and think about the views of different authors before they feel able to develop their own views and articulate them to convince readers:

When I get my own opinions, I also need to consider the opposite views and clarify the strengths and limitations of the different views. Then, I will write down my arguments logically in the assignment to prove my opinion and lead the reader to believe them.

Bohua, Business

Although critical analysis and writing can be difficult for Chinese students, Moeiniasl et al. (2022) argue that L1 students generally do not have strong CT skills either. In other words, the lack of critical thinking is not simply a challenge for students writing in a second language. Through practice, Chinese students are gradually able to read the relevant literature more critically and effectively. They learn how to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the author's views through evidence, developing their own opinions through critical thinking, and expressing their views logically and clearly to gain readers' trust.

7.6 Difficulties with subject and background knowledge content

The quality of criticality in writing is largely reliant on the subject content (Gao, 2012). Given this, if a student is not familiar with the subject itself, they are unlikely to be able to write critically. In this sense, limited proficiency in the English language also affects Chinese students' ability to critically engage with the reading and consequently, their writing. Even if they understand the need to be critical, it may seem impossible to write critically if they cannot critically read and understand the subject and background content completely.

As revealed in the Histogram 7.1, 10.6 % of participants in this study think that knowledge of the subject is the most difficult aspect of academic writing. Interviewees also identified unfamiliarity with the subject content or the background knowledge of their disciplines as a significant challenge for Chinese PGT students, one where coming from a non-western country was an added disadvantage.

In business, students said that their lecturers often used examples from European and American companies in class:

Our teachers often give examples of teaching in class. For example, when the lecturer talks about enterprise marketing, she will convey her views by mentioning Coca-Cola and H and M's marketing model. I know these well-known companies relatively well, but sometimes teachers use local companies in the UK for example. This can be understood easily by British students, but I need to check the basic information of these companies to understand what the teacher said. Only when I understand the background knowledge can I more effectively participate in the group discussion and complete the assignment.

Qing, Business School

In many cases, the lack of background knowledge and professional knowledge is also because students have not read sufficiently:

When I first started my postgraduate study, I felt that my knowledge was very limited, but by reading more literature and books recommended by my tutor, I became more and more comfortable in class and in the process of learning and writing. Therefore, only by improving the reading volume and making dialectical thinking can I learn more knowledge and complete my assignments better.

Yanan, Education

Conversely, sometimes, having background knowledge about the topic before writing can have a negative impact on students because deep-rooted beliefs can limit students' openness to new

ideas.

Sometimes the teacher assigns a task that I have been exposed to before, or learned during undergraduate study. Thus, I am very confident in the original ideas, which will lead to limited ideas. But later, I also understood that I had to read more different documents and then conduct critical analysis to make the assignment written more objective and comprehensive.

Zhihao, Business

In the same way, while communicating with classmates, lack of background knowledge and professional background combines with language barriers to determine how effectively they are able to engage in discussion or complete an assignment:

When I communicate with my Chinese classmates, I can exchange my subject background in my mother tongue because we have similar experiences and can communicate smoothly in our mother tongue. But when I am in a group of British classmates, we have different cultural and intellectual backgrounds, so we need to spend some time understanding each other's basic situations, and then find topics that we are interested in to discuss.

Zetong, Business

Hongxin (Business) also stated that when working in groups of international students, she encountered language and cultural barriers. However, facing and solving these difficulties helped her to improve her spoken English and acquire more knowledge about British society and culture. For example, when Hongxin and the group members decided on their topic for group work, the British students chose a topic they were familiar with, such as analyzing an advertisement on Facebook. This was a completely new topic for Hongxin, but it helped her understand the life of British students and allowed her to integrate into the British learning environment.

Students' lack of mastery of background and professional knowledge will affect their academic performance. Students are aware that they need to read a lot and there are barriers to this, as has been discussed. The different social backgrounds between the UK and Chinese students can also cause difficulties in learning and writing. However, as students integrate into UK classrooms and read more intensively, these challenges become less prominent.

7.7 Difficulties with coherence

Maintaining logicality and coherence between paragraphs and making a text semantically meaningful is crucial in English academic writing. Yet many participants, particularly at the beginning, pay more attention to the accuracy of the grammar, structure and spelling, rather than the coherence of the whole text. Thus when students attempt to revise their assignment, they tend not to examine it from the standpoint of readers and therefore overlook coherence.

As reported by many students, sometimes it is difficult to connect paragraphs well so that the feedback they get is that their assignment lacks logicality and coherence between paragraphs.

For instance,

When I want to discuss three points under a topic, I can arrange them very well if they are in a progressive relationship or have a timeline, but if they are three parallel arguments, I have no idea how to rank them to connect them well and make them more logical. In other words, I don't know how to make the paragraphs shift more naturally and make them a whole. Sometimes I try to add another subsection to connect the context.

Tianyuan, Education

Moreover, students also struggle to develop and structure the individual paragraph:

I know I should bring out the theme first at the beginning of the paragraph, then develop the theme and express my own opinion, and maintain clear idea progress and consistency between ideas within the paragraph. However, when I get to write an assignment, sometimes it is hard for me to catch the point of the paragraph.

Yufan, Education

For Wenyi the introduction and conclusion of her assignment were particularly difficult to write:

The introduction part needs to be concise and eye-catching to highly summarise what is going to happen in the assignment and clearly express the reason and significance of writing it. Hence, an introduction can be deemed as a high generalisation of the whole assignment. Similarly, the conclusion part also needs to summarise the full text with short content. Therefore, when writing these two parts, connecting them to the full text is necessary to make the assignment an organized whole, which is very difficult for me.

Wenyi, Education

The impact of the L1 writing structure, unfamiliarity with academic assignment writing structure in the UK and insufficient English writing proficiency all contribute to students' difficulties with coherence. However, through reading academic literature and learning along with the guidance of tutors, students can gradually improve the coherence of their assignments, and learn to create a clear structure and effective language to express their views.

7.8 Difficulties with cohesion

Although many students did not understand the difference between coherence and cohesion, it can be inferred from their answers that the use of words, phrases, clauses, sentences and other elements of an assignment are closely integrated to form a whole. What students recognize is the challenge they face in knowing how to use cohesive devices correctly in a sentence:

Owing to the different structures of Chinese and English sentences, it is difficult to express them coherently when I express them in English. Hence, it is hard for me to make the assignments fluent and cohesive.

Zhihao, Business

Although many students did not know the English term 'cohesion' in the context of academic English writing, when I explained it to them, many of them said that this skill is relatively easy to acquire. Students' difficulties mainly seem to originate from the lack of experience and practice in writing and therefore in using cohesive devices. When they read more literature in the UK, they are able to retain fixed combinations and phrases which they are then able to use in their own assignments.

7.9 Difficulties with English academic writing conventions

According to Histogram 7.1, 13.5% of participants view English academic writing conventions as the most difficult aspect of academic writing. These conventions include writing formally, using appropriate punctuation and avoiding repetition. In Academic English, the tone of the assignments should be formal rather than chatty, as Zetong explains:

Academic English requires not to start sentences with "Also" or "Besides", which is not suitable for writing a composition and may make readers think that the written text is not

under thorough consideration. Instead, we can use alternatives like "In addition" or "Furthermore". Moreover, in formal assignments, "However" is more appropriate than "But". In the meantime, "for example" should be used instead of "e.g." while giving an example.

Zetong, Business School

In addition, the use of punctuation marks varies between Chinese and English:

When I started writing academic assignments, I found that there was no book title mark (“《》” in Chinese) in English writing. Instead, book and journal titles are denoted by using italics or underscores in English articles. And when expressing parallel words or things, a sign of coordination is used in Chinese whereas a comma is adopted in English.

Lina, Education School

Students are also told to avoid repeating their arguments in their assignments. This is a challenge but when that students are able to overcome:

I always repeated my views in assignments, but later I recognized that this is incorrect. Though this helps meet the required number of words in the assignment, it will reduce the quality of the assignment. Therefore, when mentioning the previous idea, I can use "As already mentioned", "As explained above" or "Aforementioned".

Weijiao, Education school

Based on tutor feedback, Ailin is aware that too much repetition reduces the quality of her assignments:

Through my tutor’s feedback, I realized that I had repeated too many points expressed in the assignments in the summary section, which reducing the space for my own comments in it. Which makes my assignment is imbalanced in that it is more descriptive than critical.

Aiin, Education

As discussed above, the challenges that students encounter in English academic writing conventions are all temporary. Once they become familiar with the English academic writing conventions, they are able to incorporate them into their writing. With practice, this possibly becomes longer be one of the important factors affecting their writing.

7.10 Summary

This chapter has discussed the writing difficulties of Chinese students in the UK university from different perspectives. Although Chinese students come from an education system where they have studied English for many years, they face many difficulties and challenges in writing their assignments during their postgraduate study in the UK. Some are caused by different writing habits within their mother tongue, some by insufficient language skills and lack of ability to use English well, and some can be attributed to a lack of understanding about academic English writing as a mode. However, their adaptation involves becoming more familiar with and having opportunities to practice, English academic writing.

The improvement of Chinese students' academic English writing to a great extent relies on their own efforts and practice. However, it also requires the help and support of tutors within their department and the institution itself. Their academic achievement is not solely dependent on the guidance of the tutor in class but requires the positive influence of the broader social, cultural and educational environment. Given this, Chapter 8 will summarise the causes of the difficulties that are identified in the data and discuss how students should address them and what help tutors, lecturers, supervisors and the university itself can provide.

Chapter 8 Strategies to solve Chinese PGT students’ academic writing difficulties

8.1 Introduction

In addition to identifying the difficulties they encountered in English academic writing, interviewees also proposed a variety of strategies to address these challenges. This chapter presents these strategies, organised around the major themes emerging from the findings: understanding writing requirements and tutors’ expectations; reading relevant literature and sources; seeking support from the university’s student services; practising writing and revising in response to feedback; receiving effective supervision; engaging in peer support; consulting native English speakers; and using online grammar-checking and proofreading tools.

The analysis revealed that Chinese PGT students draw on multiple forms of support as they navigate the demands of academic writing. Among these strategies, understanding writing requirements and tutors’ expectations emerged as the most effective, with 62% of participants rating it as highly beneficial. This underscores the importance of clear and explicit communication between students and tutors regarding academic writing standards and assessment criteria.

From a social learning perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991), these strategies reflect students’ active engagement in the community of practice. By seeking guidance from tutors, peers and institutional resources, Chinese PGT students participate in the shared practices of their academic community and gradually progress toward fuller participation. The concept of scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976) further illuminates the role of support services, supervision and peer collaboration. Such forms of assistance provide structured guidance within students’ zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), enabling them to undertake writing tasks that would be difficult to complete independently and facilitating the gradual development of competence.

The strategy of extensive reading can also be interpreted through the lens of academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998). By engaging with disciplinary literature, Chinese PGT students gain exposure to the discourse practices, rhetorical conventions and epistemological values that underpin academic writing in their fields. Collectively, these strategies illustrate how students navigate both the linguistic and socio-cultural dimensions of academic writing, drawing on a range of resources to support their adaptation to the expectations of UK higher education.

8.2 Understand writing requirements and tutor's expectations

The first step toward successful completion of the assignment, students report, is understanding its requirements and the expectations of the tutor. If there is a misunderstanding of the topic or the assignment is developed in the wrong direction, then it may be difficult to successfully complete the assignment and achieve a good mark. For instance, as stated by Qing, knowing the requirements of the assignment will allow her to plan her writing better:

Misunderstanding assignment requirements and tutor expectations can lead to failure in the first place. When I finished my assignment on Amazon's digital market analysis, I spent too much time describing the theory without commenting on it and integrating it with my research. The tutor expected us to critically express our understanding of the theory, but I just described it.

Qing, Business

Similarly, Xiaocao pointed out the necessity of paying attention to fulfilling the tutor's expectations:

Thinking of the tutor as an audience encouraged me to take my work more seriously. After all, tutors are the ones who grade us, so meeting their expectations is more likely to lead to high scores. Therefore, when I have some ideas about the main structure and train of thought for the assignments, I will ask for the tutor's suggestion. According to the tutor's comments, I can complete the assignments better.

Xiaocao, Education

Understanding the requirements of the assignment is the first step for students when engaging with an assignment. Hence, when the tutor puts out the assignment, students should first clearly grasp the requirements and if they don't understand, ask the tutor or discuss these with

classmates, in order to clarify the thinking and start the assignment conception and writing.

8.3 Reading related literature, books, and sources

Reading was identified as one of the most effective strategies to help improve their English academic writing. For example, Xuehui identified the significance of reading articles in related fields to learn more specialised vocabulary and academic writing styles:

When I read literature and books, I record professional academic vocabulary and learn the structure of other people's articles. Therefore, when I write my assignment, I can apply the vocabulary, sentence patterns and paragraph structure I have learned to my assignments.

Xuehui, Education

Mingchao also mentioned that he was able to learn more about how to use connectives and so on from reading the literature:

When I read the research literature in my discipline, I not only pay attention to the content but also look at the paragraph structure and learn how to write topic sentences express my opinions, remember the connectives used by the author and make my article coherent.

Mingchao, Business

In addition, as Lina argues, only by reading and understanding the opinions of different researchers can her critical thinking ability be enhanced, thereby enabling her to convey her own opinions in writing:

As a student in the [education], I deeply understand the critical role of input on output. Therefore, only when the amount of reading has accumulated to a certain extent can I think more effectively and express my own views, thereby making my article more convincing.

Lina, Education

Additionally, the approach to reading is also crucial.; it is easy to waste time and energy. Zijie (business) f said that when she first started reading in English, she tried to understand every word and every sentence. Later, she recognized that this was a very inefficient practice. For some articles, she did need to read intensively but in many cases, she only needed to quickly browse the article to understand the author's thoughts and opinions.

Reading the tutor's sample assignments and learning from them is the most intuitive way to enhance the quality of students' writing:

Some tutors will upload some excellent assignments from past students after explaining the assignment requirements. I can learn from these assignments how to arrange the structure of my own assignments and how to arrange the number of words in different chapters. And according to the assignments recommended by the tutor, I can also know the expectation of the tutor for my assignment.

Zhihao, Business School

In addition to providing good student work for everyone to learn from, it may be also beneficial to provide some low-quality student work to illustrate to students what they need to avoid.

Reading articles and books recommended by course lecturers is also an effective way to develop one's writing. According to Lixiang (education) the readings recommended to students are targeted and seminal texts from which students can learn about the relevant fields.

To sum up, reading not only exposes students to relevant knowledge in their field but also helps students to understand and become familiar with academic English writing skills and patterns. Hence, while reading for content, they also need to critically look at the language, vocabulary and structure which will provide practical guidance on how to write their own assignments.

8.4 Get help from the university's student services team

The university's student services team provide help to all students so that they can study and learn more effectively. There are also specific programmes for international students to improve their ability to use academic as well as skills needed in academic writing, such as citing, using different resources, learning academic vocabulary, and planning and brainstorming their ideas prior to writing. Yanna found that participation in the drop-in sessions offered by tutors from student services benefitted her academic writing:

The school provides many English Language Support programmes for students for whom English is not their first Language. I think the most helpful session for me is academic writing. In class, the tutor not only tells us the format of writing English assignments but also provides sample examples for students to analyze and discuss together. But academic

writing courses are so crowded that they often don't have seats. Therefore, I often participate in speaking classes, reading classes and listening classes, which also improve my English application level.

Yannan, Education

Students also found writing workshops very helpful, providing a good opportunity to learn new skills aspects of writing academically:

When participating in the workshop, the tutor organizes us to learn certain skills or exchange views according to different topics. Through the tutor's explanation and communication with other students, I can have a better understanding of the mode of English writing from various perspectives. For example, when we talk about how to structure paragraphs, the tutor shuffles the sentences in a paragraph and asks us to discuss them in groups. We will find topic sentences, arguments, summary sentences, etc., and put them in order to form a complete paragraph. Through the tutor's explanation and classroom practice, I can gain a better understanding of the knowledge and skills of academic writing.

Jiaqian, Business

Seminars held by specific departments were focused on content but in providing opportunities for discussion and question and answers, also enhanced their knowledge and consequently, there confidence in writing. Yajing, Tianyuan, and Zhihao pointed out that their department invites experts from different fields to speak and give them the opportunity to ask questions:

I got a lot of inspiration from the expert's lecture at the seminar. When I'm working on a concept or idea for an assignment, but I want to hear some feedback before going any further, I'll ask questions and discuss them with others at relevant seminars.

Zhihao, Business

I not only attend lectures in Education School but also audit seminars in other schools. In this way, not only can I acquire a lot of knowledge, but also gain some inspiration for my field. For example, listening to the seminar in business school, I learned that marketing ideas can be applied to higher education.

Yajing, Education

Seminars offer the most regular opportunities for students to communicate with others. This kind of small group is perfect for getting honest feedback, which enables students to gain some suggestions to improve their ideas. However, individual tutorials with lecturers are particularly valued as they allow students to get more targeted instruction:

The lecturers at our school always arrange the tutorial to give students suggestions on the outline or draft of the assignment before we formally submit the assignment, so that I can have the opportunity to revise it before the formal submission. However, as the tutor's tutorial is usually arranged after the thesis outline or draft is submitted, I will make an appointment for one-to-one guidance from the student services team when I need any help. Although these tutors do not know my major as well as the school lecturers or professors, through communication with them, I can have a better understanding of the assignment requirements and learn a lot of skills about academic writing.

Ailin, Education

Student Services provide many different types of help to international students, including free programmes, workshops, seminars and one-on-one instruction. These activities help Chinese students gain skills in structuring English essays and expressing their critical opinions. Moreover, these skills can effectively help students to improve their academic writing ability. But places for these activities are limited and many students say they miss out on good learning opportunities because they can't get an appointment.

8.5 Practising writing and revising work based on feedback

According to interviewees, lack of writing practice is one of the crucial reasons for their lack of writing ability. Thus, many students want to be trained in how to write academic assignments, gain academic writing experience and identify and improve their shortcomings through writing practice. They believe that it is the best way to become more proficient and effective in academic writing:

Since I had no academic English writing training in my undergraduate education, I took the 8-week Pre-Sessional course offered by the university before I enrolled as a postgraduate student. In my opinion, the most helpful part of the Pro-Sessional courses was the writing programme. The tutor would ask us to do writing practices after explaining writing skills, searching and citing literature, etc., and also give us comments through one-on-one guidance. After 8 weeks of practice and revision, I had a clear understanding of academic English writing. Therefore, I do not need to spend a lot of time learning basic academic English writing requirements and standards in my postgraduate study.

Yuxin, Education

Bohua (business) explains that he needs to write different types of essays, which requires him to practice different genres of writing:

Depending on the requirements of the tutor and different courses, we need to complete different types of assignments as well, just like various types of essays, reading reports, and answering specific questions. It requires practice to master these types of methods and techniques. And getting frequent feedback from tutors can help me solve my writing difficulties.

Bohua, Business

Since Chinese students have not been trained in academic English writing during their undergraduate education, learning the relevant knowledge about academic writing and having extensive writing practice will help them overcome the challenges.

8.6 Having effective supervision

Supervision and assistance are important for students to acquire knowledge and succeed in learning. Consequently, students paid much attention to maintaining a good relationship with their lecturers and tutors. Weijiao highlighted the importance for students to understand the pattern of their relationship with the tutor from the beginning of the course:

In the first session of each course, the tutor tells us how to ask for help when in doubt. Some tutors suggested that we send emails, some advised us to make an appointment for the one-on-one tutorial, and some tutors would arrange instruction time for each student in advance. Therefore, we could solve our confusion in different ways.

Weijiao, Education

In addition, it is the student's responsibility to prepare for a tutorial. Indeed, Yawen pointed out that preparing carefully for the tutorial was the prerequisite for having a high-quality tutorial:

I usually prepare my questions before the tutorial, so that the tutor can give me specific advice and guidance. In addition, I will make notes and summaries during the tutorial. If I have any questions, I will communicate with the tutor via email after the tutorial.

Yawen, Business

Other participants referred to the importance of communicating effectively with tutors:

Students need to communicate well with tutors about the assignments they need to complete, so as to avoid mistakes in information transmission that may affect the quality of the tutorial.

Bohua, Business School

Reimeng found that being able to ask for clarification from their tutors was a critical step in acquiring knowledge and completing the assignment:

Tutorial before submitting the assignment is vital for my process of study. The tutor always gives me suggestions on the outline and preliminary ideas of my draft. This provides a chance for me to ask questions and ask for clarifications if I am not sure what to do. It is a very targeted guidance for me to complete the assignments because I can know the expectation of the tutor and the imperfection of my draft. Thus, I have the opportunity to adjust the structure of my assignment according to the feedback of my tutor before formally submitting it, choose more appropriate literature and express my ideas more clearly.

Ruimeng, Business

The quality of support from student services, tutors and lecturers plays a crucial role in helping students improve their writing ability. Students need to take the initiative to communicate with their tutors and seek their help.

8.7 Peer support and enlisting the help of native English speakers

Because of the power relationship between tutors and students, some students prefer to seek help from peers or native English speakers. Peer-assisted learning works well for Chinese students. International students are assigned a UK student with whom they then form a group. Through this mutual help model, students from different countries can learn from each other and learn about different cultures. By communicating with UK students, Chinese students can practice their oral English and develop their understanding of British society and culture, so as to receive specific guidance and more general pastoral support for their academic study. As Yushan put it:

The peer assisted learning programme enabled me to make British friends from different disciplines. By communicating with them, I can have a better understanding of life and some social and cultural activities in Britain. It helped me improve my spoken English. At

the same time, when I encountered difficulties in reading and writing, they would be very friendly to help me solve difficulties and put forward suggestions.

Yushan, Education

Hongxin also noted the significance of having a native English-speaking friend to help her read and check her assignments before submitting them:

I think it's important to have a native speaker read my writing through before submitting it and tell me which part or idea is not clear enough. After all, English is his or her mother tongue, and he or she can clearly find the problems and areas for improvement in my writing.

Hongxin, Business

The above data indicates the significance for Chinese students of communicating with native English speakers as much as possible so that they can know more about British customs and enhance their ability to use English as this will have a beneficial impact also on their writing.

8.8 Using online grammar checking and proofreading software

Using proofreading to check the accuracy of students' expressions is one of the strategies Chinese students adopt to improve their English writing. For instance, as reported by Zixin, it is a good practice to ask a native speaker to read an assignment before submitting it, as they can help check the grammar and expression:

I asked my tutor whether I could ask a friend to help me read the article. The tutor mentioned that proofreading my work and checking my English is acceptable as long as the proofreading is not for my writing. This can improve the quality of the assignments. However, the tutor did not recommend reading services to us. It would be more helpful if the tutor could recommend where students could get additional language support and tell us to seek it out. Just in case we find an unprofessional proofreader.

Zixin, Business

Shaoming uses a website called Grammarly to help him check grammar and vocabulary and also uses a professional proofreader to check the assignment before submitting it. In this way, he can not only improve the fluency of the language and the logic of the article but also identify deficiencies in language expression by comparing his own writing with the proofreader's

revised content:

Grammarly is a very useful website for checking basic grammar and vocabulary when I'm writing an email or an assignment. But it doesn't meet the requirements of academic writing, so I still need a professional proofreader to proofread my assignment. By reading the revised content, I can spot the difference between my original assignment and the proofread assignment.

Shaoming, Business

Apart from using online software and finding a professional proofreader, some students say they ask their families and friends to read their assignments. For instance, Tianqi, Qing and Zijie asked their friends to read their assignment before submission. Although their friends were not in the same department, as readers, they were able to point out poor expression and logic as well as identify grammar and word choice problems.

From what has been discussed, Chinese students have made it clear that they are in great need of additional language support and that these language support services play a significant role in improving their assignment fluency and English writing ability. However, students report that although they need to improve their writing abilities and skills at the beginning of the postgraduate writing, they become increasingly confident in completing their dissertations independently after a period of writing training. As Zixin put it:

After studying and practising writing in the first semester, I became very confident with my assignments in the second semester. One year of study in the UK has made significant progress in my English writing.

Zixin, Business

Kellogg and Raulerson (2007) state that practice can markedly improve students' writing. Many participants in this study report that their academic English writing skills improved significantly within one year of postgraduate study as they practised their academic English writing.

8.9 Summary

This chapter discusses the help Chinese students seek in the UK when they have difficulties

with writing their assignments. The participants in the study had many different experiences of writing while studying in the UK. Given that the language and mode of writing varies considerably from what Chinese students will have completed during their undergraduate years, they need time to adapt to the new modes of writing. This research points out that in order to successfully meet writing requirements and improve writing quality, Chinese students should read more and get timely help from the tutors in the university's student services team. They also need opportunities to socialise with their tutors, peers and friends. All these opportunities help them to integrate into the new writing environment.

Across Chapters 5 to 8, the combined analysis of questionnaire responses, interview data, and students' written assignments revealed several recurring themes shaping the academic writing experiences of Chinese PGT students: the impact of academic culture shock, the significance of social relationships, the nature of academic writing challenges, and the strategies students adopt to address these difficulties. Drawing on concepts from social learning theory and academic literacies—such as legitimate peripheral participation, scaffolding, the zone of proximal development, and disciplinary discourse practices—the discussion has illustrated the complex, iterative process through which students negotiate and internalise the conventions of academic writing in the UK.

Overall, the findings indicate that although Chinese PGT students face considerable challenges, they also demonstrate agency by actively mobilising a range of resources and support systems. Clear communication, supportive academic relationships, and participation in the wider community of practice are central to their academic writing development. These insights carry important implications for both Chinese PGT students and UK universities, informing how academic writing support can be enhanced to improve students' transition and success in postgraduate study. The subsequent chapter will further explore these implications and outline recommendations for practice.

Chapter 9 Discussion of the Research Finding

9.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the key findings from the study, drawing upon critical pedagogical frameworks (Benesch, 2009; Giroux, 2020; McLaren and Kincheloe, 2007) to analyze Chinese students' experiences with academic writing in their postgraduate studies in the UK. Rather than framing Chinese students' challenges from a deficit perspective that locates the "problem" within the students themselves, a critical pedagogical lens considers how sociocultural, linguistic and institutional factors shape students' academic writing development. This includes examining power imbalances, cultural differences in academic expectations, and the funds of knowledge (Moll, 2019; Moll et al., 2013) that students bring from their prior learning experiences in China. The goal is to identify opportunities for transformative pedagogies that validate students' identities, leverage their strengths, and provide scaffolding to help them master the conventions of academic writing in their disciplines.

For EFL students, academic writing can be a challenging and complicated task, especially when English is used as the instructional language (Al-Harbi and Troudi, 2020). This has been demonstrated in a great deal of literature. For example, Huang (2010) noted that academic writing in English during postgraduate study necessitates students' abilities to synthesise a variety of perspectives and consider other researchers' viewpoints critically in order to express their own academic standpoint. Chinese researchers have also found that it is difficult to write in a foreign language, especially when compared with other language skills (Gu, 2009; Zhang, 2018).

In contrast to other forms of writing, academic writing is not only a process of systematically presenting ideas and experiences but also a test of logic and reasoning. According to Elander et al. (2006), writing skills constitute an essential part of university studies as the main mode of assessment for university courses. Therefore, it is necessary for students to strengthen their writing skills to deal with university courses in different disciplines so that their writing meets the expectations of teachers and universities and thus enables them to achieve academic success.

In the previous four chapters, findings were presented in response to the following research questions:

1. What are the academic writing experiences of Chinese postgraduate students at a UK university?
2. What difficulties do Chinese postgraduate students encounter during their English academic writing?
3. What resources and support do Chinese postgraduate students receive to help them with their English academic writing?

This chapter provides a discussion of the main research findings, with the aim of identifying how the findings relate to findings in other studies. It seeks to establish the significance of my findings in relation to the literature, while responding to the research questions, and then identify the key factors that influence Chinese students' academic writing in English and providing suggestions for students, tutors and universities. In order to achieve this aim, this chapter provides insights around three main themes. Firstly, a variety of factors lead to the difficulties experienced by students in English writing and the resulting failure to meet academic requirements. Secondly, in order to meet academic requirements, students need to identify their own unique needs in academic writing in English. Thirdly, Chinese postgraduate students should learn to take advantage of peer support, professorial feedback and institutional support appropriately and efficiently. These themes are interrelated and interact in many ways.

In this chapter, the author will share conclusions drawn from the key findings of this study in terms of: helping students understand academic writing expectations in UK HEIs; addressing their academic writing difficulties; and promoting the understanding of the unique writing needs of Chinese postgraduate students in higher education institutions.

9.2 Academic Writing Challenges: More than Language Proficiency

A key finding from the survey and interviews is that the difficulties Chinese students encountered with academic writing went beyond English language barriers to include navigating unfamiliar rhetorical styles, understanding instructors' expectations, and decoding

the tacit rules of knowledge construction and argumentation in their fields. Many participants reported struggling with the level of critical analysis and original thought required in UK university writing assignments compared to the more expository, knowledge-telling approach common in undergraduate writing in China.

As one interviewee, Yushan, explained: "In China, we just needed to show we understood what we learned from the textbooks and lectures. But here, we have to question the authors' ideas, find gaps in the research, and bring our own perspectives. It's a very different way of thinking and writing." Another participant, Wei, shared: "I got feedback from my professor saying my essay was too descriptive and lacked a clear argument. I realized I didn't really understand what it meant to have a 'thesis statement' or how to structure my writing around it."

These experiences echo research highlighting how academic writing is a complex socialization process of understanding disciplinary norms, values and practices, not just acquiring generic skills (Hyland, 2004; Lea and Street, 1998). A critical pedagogical approach views academic writing as "contextualized social practices" (Benesch, 2009, p.82) deeply entangled with cultural notions of knowledge, identity and power in higher education. Chinese students thus had to navigate dissonances between their prior learning and new expectations while also grappling with language challenges.

Several participants noted that the emphasis on individual voice and original contributions in UK academic writing clashed with the values of collectivism and respect for authority instilled through their Chinese education. As Jing shared: "In China, we were taught not to disagree with the experts or challenge established knowledge. Here, we're expected to have our own critical insights, but I struggle with finding that balance between valuing others' work and expressing my own ideas."

This tension points to the "hidden curriculum" (Giroux and Purpel, 1983) of Western academic norms that often go unnamed and unexamined in higher education. For students from different educational backgrounds, deciphering these implicit expectations can feel like learning a whole new language on top of English itself. As Benesch (2009) argues, EAP should go beyond

"accommodationist" stances to help students examine and question dominant discourses. Instructors can scaffold this critical awareness along with teaching rhetorical strategies.

Some participants also highlighted how differences in writing style preferences between Chinese and UK higher education shaped their transition experiences. As Yan explained: "In China, we learned to write long, complex sentences to show our language ability. But here, the professors want clear, concise writing in plain English. I had to unlearn my old habits and re-learn paragraph structure, sentence patterns, and logical flow in a new way."

This example illustrates how linguistic differences are not just surface-level issues but reflect deeper cultural variations in communication norms and values (Kaplan, 1966; Connor, 1996). Chinese students were thus juggling multiple layers of adaptation - from micro-level language features to macro-level discourse expectations. This learning curve was steepened by the lack of explicit instruction on these expectations, leaving students to figure them out through trial and error.

Importantly, framing these challenges as simply deficits in students' abilities fails to account for the broader power structures and cultural ideologies that shape academic writing practices. As Lillis (2003) contends, academic writing is a "socially situated practice" that reflects and reproduces particular ways of knowing, being and communicating that are valued in higher education. For students from non-dominant backgrounds, mastering these practices is not just a matter of skill acquisition but of navigating unequal power relations and asserting one's legitimacy in academic spaces.

A critical pedagogical approach thus calls for interrogating and transforming the conditions that create barriers for students, rather than expecting them to simply assimilate to the status quo. This means acknowledging the cultural specificity of academic norms, making tacit expectations explicit, and creating space for students to draw upon their diverse linguistic and cultural resources in their writing. As one participant, Chen, insightfully reflected: "I don't think it's fair to judge our writing only by Western standards. We have our own ways of thinking and expressing ideas that also have value. The university should respect and include different

perspectives."

Indeed, Chinese students' writing experiences point to the need for more inclusive and pluralistic approaches to academic communication in an increasingly globalized higher education landscape. While teaching standard conventions is important for students' academic success, it should be balanced with validating students' diverse voices and empowering them to reshape academic discourses. As Canagarajah (2011) argues, a "translingual" orientation to writing pedagogy can help students develop critical language awareness and negotiate their multiple identities and linguistic resources in their writing.

Cultivating this critical consciousness requires intentional efforts from both instructors and institutions. Some strategies could include:

- Integrating discussions of linguistic and cultural diversity into writing curricula, such as comparing rhetorical practices across contexts
- Providing explicit instruction on disciplinary norms and expectations while also encouraging students to question and challenge these norms
- Creating opportunities for students to reflect on their own cultural and linguistic identities and how they shape their writing
- Valuing students' multilingual abilities as assets and incorporating translingual writing practices

Advocating for institutional reforms in assessment and faculty development to promote more culturally sustaining approaches to writing instruction (Paris and Alim, 2017)

Implementing these strategies requires ongoing collaboration and reflexivity among all members of the academic community. As Giroux (2020) notes, a critical pedagogy is not a static set of techniques but a dynamic process of dialogue, critique and transformation. Supporting Chinese students' academic writing development is thus an invitation to critically re-examine and re-imagine the possibilities for more equitable and expansive forms of meaning-making in higher education.

9.3 Relationality and Negotiating Identities in Academic Writing

Another salient theme from the findings was how academic writing involved ongoing negotiation of social identities and relationships for Chinese students. Many participants found the more independent, egalitarian student-instructor dynamic in the UK jarring compared to the hierarchical relations and emphasis on harmony in Chinese classrooms. They had to adjust to a new ethos of debate, individual voice, and co-constructing knowledge with authorities.

As Lixiang shared in her interview: "In China, we seldom expressed disagreement with teachers. We saw them as experts who passed on knowledge to us. But here, teachers want us to have different opinions and argue our own conclusions. It took me a while to get used to this way of interacting." Similarly, Feng noted: "I was surprised when my professor asked me to call him by his first name. In China, we always use formal titles to show respect for teachers. It felt strange to be on such casual terms with a professor."

These examples highlight the deeply relational nature of academic writing as students establish their positionalities and stake their claims to disciplinary membership (Ivanič, 1998). It requires negotiating multiple, sometimes conflicting writer identities - as novice and expert, as Chinese and international student, as dutiful learner and critical thinker. For Chinese students, this often involved code-switching between different norms of interpersonal communication and power dynamics.

Some participants shared how they initially struggled with the expectation to assert a strong individual voice in their writing, having been socialized to prioritize collective harmony and deference to authority. As Jun explained: "In China, we were taught to blend in and not stand out too much. But in UK essays, you have to make bold arguments and sell your own ideas. It feels uncomfortable to put myself out there like that, but I'm learning to adapt."

This tension reflects the individualistic values and "argument culture" (Tannen, 1998) that underpin much of Western academic discourse, which can be at odds with the more communal and consensus-building approach in Chinese cultural contexts. Navigating this cultural gap not only added to the cognitive load of writing for Chinese students but also had affective

dimensions as they grappled with issues of identity, belonging and self-presentation.

A critical pedagogy lens attends to how identity intersects with power in academic spaces and equips students to enact empowered subjectivities (Giroux, 2020). This means recognizing the politics of self-representation in academic writing and validating the diverse identities and positionalities that students bring. Instructors can acknowledge the rhetorical and emotional labor of this identity work and affirm students' cultural diversity as a resource.

For example, writing activities could incorporate reflections on how students' cultural backgrounds shape their writing styles, or comparative analyses of how arguments are constructed in different cultural contexts. Classroom discussions could also critically examine the dominant values and assumptions embedded in academic writing norms, such as individualism or linear logic, and explore alternative modes of expression.

By making space for students to negotiate their identities and draw upon their cultural funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2013), writing pedagogies can foster a sense of agency and ownership over the language. As Wei asserted: "I don't want to just mimic Western ways of writing. I want to find my own voice that integrates my Chinese heritage and international experiences. My goal is to express my unique perspective, not just conform to a single standard."

Indeed, Chinese students' experiences point to the need for more fluid and plural understandings of academic identities that transcend essentialist East-West binaries. As Motha and Lin (2014) argue, in the context of globalization and transnational mobility, students are constantly navigating "ever-shifting constellations of identities" (p. 332) that defy simplistic categorization. A critical writing pedagogy should thus embrace this complexity and dynamism, and equip students to enact agentive identities in their writing.

This also means challenging deficit discourses that frame Chinese students as passive, uncritical learners and recognizing the nuanced ways they negotiate and resist cultural norms (Grimshaw, 2008). As Yufan shared: "Some professors assume that all Chinese students are the same and that we struggle with critical thinking. But we're not a monolith. We each have our own personalities, strengths and ways of adapting."

A strengths-based approach that validates students' prior knowledge and experiences can help counter these essentializing narratives and cultivate more empowering identities. Instructors can create opportunities for students to reflect on and leverage their multilingual and multicultural repertoires in their writing, such as through translanguaging practices (Canagarajah, 2013) or autoethnographic writing (Canagarajah, 2012).

Moreover, fostering peer connections and dialogues can help students develop a sense of belonging and shared identity in the academic community. As Lili expressed: "Talking with other Chinese students who were going through similar challenges made me feel less alone. We could support and learn from each other." Creating spaces for collective meaning-making and solidarity, such as peer review groups or writing retreats, can help mitigate feelings of isolation and marginalization.

Ultimately, supporting Chinese students' academic writing development means creating conditions for them to negotiate their identities and positionalities on their own terms. This requires deconstructing the power hierarchies and cultural ideologies that shape academic norms, and centering students' agency and voice in the learning process. As Weijiao poignantly reflected: "I don't just want to survive in this system; I want to thrive and make my mark. I want my writing to reflect who I am and what I stand for, not just what the university expects of me."

Honoring this vision requires a fundamental shift in how we conceptualize and practice writing instruction - from a model of assimilation to one of empowerment and transformation. It means working towards more inclusive, equitable and humanizing forms of academic communication that celebrate the rich diversity of students' identities and experiences. In the words of Freire (1970), it means cultivating "a pedagogy of hope" that affirms students' full humanity and potential to be agents of change in their own learning and in the world.

9.4 Major difficulties encountered by Chinese students in academic writing in English

Academic writing in English at the postgraduate-level is a complex topic that encompasses multiple levels of social, cultural and linguistic factors. As mentioned previously, although existing studies have provided insights into the academic writing experiences of Chinese

postgraduate students in the UK, the specific needs and requirements of Chinese postgraduate students in their English writing practices are not addressed. The findings of this study show how Chinese postgraduate students in the UK use a variety of resources and strategies to enhance their independent learning and meet academic expectations. This section will describe and analyze the main difficulties students encounter in academic writing in English.

9.4.1 Vocabulary deficits and grammatical difficulties

One of the most prominent difficulties faced by Chinese students in their academic writing in English is using the right vocabulary to express their ideas. In their study, Luo (2020) stated that Chinese undergraduate students often have a limited English vocabulary upon graduation, having memorized only a few words, phrases and basic grammar rules. Despite the fact that Chinese universities expect college students to master a large amount of English vocabulary, especially the specialized vocabulary of their majors, students do not have many opportunities to use the correct use of academic English to express academic ideas during their college years due to the overall environment of Chinese universities.

In addition, as Wingate (2015) point out, the completion of postgraduate assignments in the UK requires the accumulation of a large, advanced vocabulary, which poses a significant challenge for EFL students. The lack of vocabulary and expertise also hinders students' effectiveness in gaining the reading input for postgraduate study, resulting in low reading speed, inadequate reading, a limited specialised vocabulary and a lack of expertise. As a result, the lack of opportunities for students to use these vocabularies in real life has led to the fact that most Chinese students are not able to express their opinions freely in English during their transition to study abroad.

One of the possible reasons for inappropriate wording in Chinese students' expressions of their opinions in English is related to the teaching methods used in Chinese English classrooms. For example, Ma's (2011) study found that in English classes in Chinese colleges and universities, teachers mainly emphasize the memorisation of vocabulary and grammar rather than instructing students in the application of the learnt vocabulary in authentic English contexts or academic

contexts. In addition, English vocabulary teaching in China, Chinese teachers focus mainly on the correct spelling of words and the understanding of the individual meanings of words, resulting in poor speaking skills and the inability of students to apply appropriate vocabulary in specific contexts. These factors result in Chinese students having limited experience in the use of English at the undergraduate level, which hinders the development of English proficiency.

It is, therefore, argued that English vocabulary teaching in China should adopt a bottom-up approach based on students' experiences instead of teaching using traditional pedagogical theories. Furthermore, students should be trained in the application of effective strategies to address their vocabulary difficulties in English writing, so as to move towards self-directed learning. Students would then be motivated to acquire the English vocabulary they need through a variety of channels and means.

In line with the above research, the majority of students who participated in this study acknowledged the need for them to read widely in English, both the specialised and general content, to overcome these difficulties. These findings are also supported by Nagy and Townsend's (2012) suggestion that more English reading courses should be provided for students to encourage them to read more widely, thereby increasing their English vocabulary and improving their academic writing in English.

9.4.2 Coherence in English writing

The participants in this study noted that another difficulty encountered by them in academic writing in English was how to make their ideas cohere. Also, this study found that students had difficulty in organising their ideas correctly and logically within the text, which is in line with Lan's (2015) findings. They found that Chinese students' English writing is generally poor in terms of sentence breaks and sentence links. In addition, other studies have shown that Chinese students face difficulties in English writing at the sentence and paragraph levels, including the transition of ideas, the logical connection of ideas, the unity of paragraphs, and the L1-to-L2 rhetorical transfer (Wei et al., 2023).

Difficulties in linking ideas or changing ideas logically within sentences and between paragraphs can be partially attributed to the following factors. Firstly, Chinese students lack knowledge of the coherent and cohesive organization in English writing. Secondly, Chinese writing instruction and rubrics are very traditional and product-oriented, solely focusing on vocabulary and grammar, which conforms to the findings of this study, where some participants reported that their acquisition of knowledge about English writing was limited by traditional Chinese teaching methods.

Thirdly, as Chinese students are not familiar with academic English, it could be a challenging task for them to acquire English writing styles and conventions, which may result in these EFL students' completion of their English writing in the style of their native language. The writing conventions of each country are often rooted in its cultural and historical specificity, as well as a reflection of cultural experiences. Thus, traditional Chinese writing styles influence how Chinese students frame and express themselves in their English writing (Heng, 2018).

Fourthly, academic writing is cognitively complex according to the Social-Cognitive Theory of Writing, which suggests that writing in a second language is a complex process. To express themselves effectively, therefore, students have to improve their second language communication skills, especially in writing (Jacobson *et al.*, 2011). Acknowledging the complexity of the English writing process, the participants in this study pointed out the importance of a clear outline to the facilitation of academic writing in English as a sensible essay outline could help students complete their essays more logically. Furthermore, in order to provide effective teaching methods, teachers should be informed of the social and cognitive factors affecting second language acquisition and the reasons for errors in writing in a second language, as these factors play a prominent role in guiding students in developing their English writing.

9.4.3 Constructing logical arguments

Most participants in this study reported that constructing logical arguments was a significant difficulty they encountered in academic writing in English at the postgraduate-level. This is

consistent with the findings of Singh and Fu's (2008) study, which found that Chinese postgraduate students studying at UK universities experience great difficulty in constructing arguments appropriately in their dissertations. Other studies have also confirmed that constructing arguments is a challenge for Chinese EFL students, which is in line with a great deal of literature supporting students' difficulties in generating written academic arguments.

As described in Chapter 6, Chinese EFL students' difficulties in constructing arguments can be attributed to differences in the rhetorical characteristics of Chinese and English writing, most of which stem from cultural and writing style differences. In addition, a lack of knowledge about argument organization and rhetorical structures in English has been cited as the reason for this difficulty when presenting arguments. Similarly, this study has shown that it was difficult for Chinese students to construct and apply the rhetorical aspects of an argument in their English writing. The participants indicated that a lack of explicit instruction prevented them from understanding the methods and structure of argument organization in English.

Moreover, the difficulties Chinese students face in developing their arguments are attributed to the English teaching model at the undergraduate level in China. First, Chinese undergraduate English textbooks focus on comprehension and sentence analysis of English texts and lack a systematic course on English writing. Second, English at Chinese universities is mainly teacher-centred, and students are marginalised in the classroom and lack opportunities for English expression. Third, Chinese undergraduate-level students lack practice in academic English writing. All three of these points need to be addressed if students are to improve their ability to construct effective arguments. For example, students' perspectives and needs provide clues for educators to help them identify students' needs and deficiencies so that they can help students solve their problems. In addition, by reading students' English writing content, teachers can visually identify problems and areas for improvement.

To help students overcome this difficulty, it is claimed that the instruction of academic writing in English should focus on improving students' ability to outline their arguments, while improving other aspects such as language is subordinate to it (Marlink, 2009). This claim and the findings of this study suggest that more explicit pedagogy should be applied in Chinese

universities to teach students how to construct academic arguments in English. According to Toulmin's (1958) Model, the process of effectively constructing academic arguments is supported by a cycle of six steps: claim, data, warrant, backing, qualifier and rebuttal. In addition, instructing students in how to construct academic arguments not only increases their awareness of their individual skills and creative potential but also encourages them to actively communicate with their tutors and peers, all of which contribute to improving students' academic thinking and presentation skills.

9.4.4 Inadequate understanding of plagiarism

The results of this study showed that many Chinese students are very anxious about being accused of plagiarism and they are acutely worried about not meeting the writing requirements, particularly when they first start to write academically in English. Many Chinese students cite plagiarism as one of the biggest difficulties they encountered in academic writing in English because the definition of plagiarism in Chinese studies is different from that in UK universities. In the UK, plagiarism can, in some cases, lead to failing assignments and even expulsion from university.

This challenge can be attributed to the fact that Chinese students are generally unfamiliar with the concept of plagiarism and the rules of academic integrity in Western countries. Although they have been taught not to plagiarise in China, they should place more emphasis and learn how to avoid plagiarism during their studies in the UK. Hyland (2001) noted that plagiarism is sometimes seen as a strategy to meet academic expectations due to non-native speakers' inadequate linguistic and sociolinguistic skills. In addition, research suggests that another reason for plagiarism among international postgraduate students is their unfamiliarity with the ways of thinking, speaking and writing in particular subjects, while some other researchers believe that the desire to achieve high grades and the fear of failure may lead to students' plagiarism (Bennett, 2017). This suggests that some students may deliberately plagiarise for a number of reasons, for example, they are lazy and do not want to complete the assignment by themselves, they think that plagiarism may not be detected, or they may not be able to complete

the paper in time for the deadline, so they copy and paste other people's work to complete the assignment (Gu and Brooks, 2008).

In order to avoid plagiarism, tutors must clarify the unacceptability of plagiarism and adopt a zero-tolerance approach to plagiarism (Sharma, 2010), while students should become more aware of the importance of self-directed learning, being proactive in learning the rules of academic writing in English and mastering ways to avoid plagiarism. A more effective way of helping students self-test their assignments is to use plagiarism software such as “Turnitin”, a software programme commonly used in colleges and universities, which shows the similarity between submitted papers and existing literature and helps students and teachers identify the amount of matching text in an assignment.

Furthermore, this study has shown that Chinese students lacked sufficient knowledge about the several meanings of plagiarism and that Chinese universities should raise awareness of plagiarism among university students. For example, Chinese universities could provide students with a range of courses to understand the standards and requirements for plagiarism in different countries which would better prepare them, through exercises involving paraphrasing.

9.4.5 Lack of critical thinking and writing

This study found that inadequate critical thinking and critical writing were the most serious challenges for most participants. This finding is in line with Lu and Singh's (2017) findings, which demonstrated that a lack of critical thinking is a challenge for Chinese students in their English assignments, hindering them from completing high-quality assignments and expressing their opinions.

The existing literature suggests that the Chinese education system overemphasizes the importance of memorisation. Although input is important for students' learning, the lack of attention to their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities also prevents them from reflecting on what they have learnt. A considerable amount of research has underlined the lack of critical thinking skills among Chinese students. There are several main reasons for this phenomenon. Firstly, in a Chinese culture that advocates belief in authority and respect for the

achievements of others, critical thinking is perceived to be the criticism of others. Indeed, some believe that this means disrespect of traditional culture. Chinese students are therefore taught not to question their elders and not to question the views of authority figures. The education and upbringing they receive at an early age leads to Chinese students' reluctance to question and criticise authority easily. As a result, it is difficult for them to express their disagreement with their teachers, peers or existing literature in their studies in the UK.

Furthermore, some participants in this study associated their lack of critical thinking with the Chinese education system, which conforms to the work of many researchers who have found that the lack of critical thinking skills reported by Chinese students is due to the overly traditional Chinese education system. The Chinese education system is dominated by a lecture model in which students are used to listening to teachers and accepting what they are taught rather than valuing interaction and debate with teachers and peers. In other words, students tend to accept and remember what they have heard and read, rarely screening or analyzing the information they receive through their own judgement and reasoning.

However, according to some participants, education in China is now also encouraging the promotion of critical thinking skills, with schoolteachers attaching great importance to the development of students' independent thinking skills. Significant progress has been made in recent years in the development and implementation of techniques and strategies to improve students' critical thinking skills. On the other hand, due to the shortage of teachers specialising in teaching EAP in Chinese universities, teachers are often unable to create or adopt these strategies and techniques for their students at the tertiary level (Kohnke and Fount, 2023), thus leaving students ill-equipped to develop their critical thinking ability.

Although the guidance methods and instructional systems of Chinese teachers are not yet perfect, they have, to a certain extent, increased students' awareness and ability of independent learning. As a result, the participants explained that the lack of critical thinking among Chinese students was not entirely due to the traditional Chinese educational model. Some students believed that it was due to an inadequate understanding of the criteria for judging British assignments, which resulted in Chinese students' writing styles and patterns not meeting the

expectations and requirements of teachers and universities in the UK. This finding is consistent with the findings of Wu's (2015) study, which found that Chinese students' learning behavior evolves as individuals engage in real situations. Stereotypes about Chinese students must be broken and their progress constantly documented in order to produce effective cross-cultural teaching and practice in a culturally diverse environment and to enable students to adapt to the UK learning atmosphere and assessment standards.

Also, the lack of critical thinking among Chinese students results from the lack of communication and integration between disciplines in the Chinese higher education system. Students need to learn how to understand, interpret, and analyze the knowledge involved in their own disciplines by studying a wide range of related disciplines and knowledge because interpreting, analyzing, evaluating, reasoning, explaining and self-regulating are the core cognitive skills of critical thinking (Facione, 2011). Furthermore, critical thinking plays an essential role in accomplishing learning tasks. Therefore, acquiring a wide range of knowledge can help students improve their dialectical thinking skills so that they can better organize and develop their thoughts and integrate physical and mental processes to communicate information and ideas in unison. This will contribute to high-quality academic writing.

According to Wu (2015), an over-emphasis on knowledge at the expense of reasoning skills impairs students' academic performance because Chinese ELT assessments, students are encouraged to answer factual questions. For example, in answering multiple-choice questions, they are allowed to choose appropriate answers without the need to present arguments to support their views or answers. This is underpinned by rote learning rather than the development of critical thinking. Given that critical thinking is a process that requires long-term training and the acquisition of basic knowledge, Chinese students come to postgraduate study with a disadvantage in this sense. However, while answering factual questions limits students' critical thinking, it also plays an important role in acquiring basic knowledge. Students can therefore still improve their critical thinking in other ways. While differences in the standards of understanding and assessment of critical thinking in Chinese universities persists,

there is a move within Chinese universities towards gradually improving their English education systems to align with the West.

In addition to critical thinking courses and strategies, Chinese students' attitudes towards critical thinking and self-directed learning also affect their academic progress (Wu, 2015) . Many students are unwilling to practise critical thinking due to its complexity, preferring teachers' direct guidance on how to search literature, analyze data and frame assignments. Participants in this study revealed that their understanding of what critical thinking means and the skills it requires was limited and vague. Although they had devoted a lot of effort to their English writing to make their assignments arguably more persuasive, they found that they still failed to meet the requirements of their supervisors. The development of critical thinking is an ongoing process that requires time and patience to support and assist learners in their active learning. To help Chinese students make the transition into meeting UK university expectations, students need support in linking critical thinking to academic writing and focusing on improving their dialectical thinking skills in academic writing through reading and writing exercises.

Current research shows that critical thinking plays an important role in meeting the academic requirements of UK universities, as well as the long-term academic development of Chinese students (Wu, 2015). Therefore, Chinese universities should focus on improving and developing students' critical thinking skills, which would not only positively impact the integration of Chinese students into the Western academic environment but also contribute to the overall learning ability and quality of Chinese students. Therefore, Chinese universities should not only continue to train teachers to change their teaching mode from EGP to EAP but also to improve students' independent learning ability and motivation.

9.5 Mobilizing Funds of Knowledge for Academic Writing

Despite the significant challenges they encountered, Chinese PGT students also drew upon a range of strengths and resources—what Moll et al. (1992; 2013) conceptualize as “funds of knowledge”—to support their academic writing development. These included prior English-

language learning experiences, strong test-taking strategies, well-established study habits, and robust peer networks. Many students engaged in extensive self-directed learning outside scheduled teaching, such as reading journal articles, attending writing workshops, revising drafts based on feedback, and seeking guidance from tutors or more experienced peers.

As Zixun described: “I improved my writing by revising my papers many times and reading many journal articles to understand academic style.” Jing similarly emphasized collaborative learning: “Our study group of Chinese students helped each other proofread drafts and discuss writing techniques. It made me more confident.” These examples demonstrate students’ resilience and resourcefulness, countering deficit narratives that portray international students as passive or lacking initiative (Grimshaw, 2008).

Recognizing students’ funds of knowledge allows instructors to adopt resource-oriented pedagogies (Cummins, 2009) that affirm students’ cultural, linguistic, and experiential assets. For example, writing tasks that invite comparative rhetorical analysis can enable students to draw on their bilingual repertoires, while structured peer review can harness collective expertise developed in previous educational contexts. Opportunities for students to articulate the strategies they use—such as language apps, online writing communities, or informal mentoring—can further cultivate agency and ownership in their writing development.

Importantly, valuing multilingual abilities as assets rather than deficits also challenges monolingual norms in academia. Pedagogical approaches such as codemeshing (Canagarajah, 2011) or translingual writing (Lu and Horner, 2013) can expand rhetorical possibilities and validate students’ identities. As Mei reflected: “I used to see my Chinese background as a disadvantage, but now I realize it gives me unique perspectives.”

However, a critical funds of knowledge framework goes beyond celebrating diversity. Without attention to structural inequities, such celebration risks becoming what Turner (2010) calls “benevolent multiculturalism,” which does little to challenge deeper power hierarchies. A critical approach requires interrogating the deficit ideologies embedded in academic writing norms and advocating for institutional reforms—such as bilingual tutoring, discipline-specific

writing support, or training in culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris and Alim, 2014). It also means reconceptualizing academic writing as a culturally situated practice shaped by particular historical and ideological forces (Lillis and Scott, 2007) rather than a neutral or universal standard.

Students in this study articulated a desire not only to adapt to academic norms but to contribute to reshaping them. As Chen stated: “Academic writing shouldn’t only be about conforming. Our diverse experiences can enrich the field.” This underscores the need to position Chinese PGT students as co-constructors of knowledge rather than mere recipients of academic conventions.

Mobilizing students’ funds of knowledge thus becomes a transformative pedagogical act—one grounded in reflexivity, collaboration, and sociocritical literacy (Gutiérrez, 2008). It requires acknowledging the emotional and intellectual labour students invest in navigating linguistic, cultural, and institutional barriers, and working in solidarity to dismantle these barriers. As Lili expressed: “My writing is not just for myself—it’s for making universities more inclusive.” Supporting Chinese students’ academic writing development, therefore, involves not only skill-building but also honouring their full humanity and potential as agents of change within—and beyond—higher education.

9.5.1 Navigating academic culture shock

In this study, the second finding pertained to the wider context: beyond the linguistic model of academic writing in English, it relates to Chinese students’ experiences of navigating academic culture shock and social relations in English writing. Unlike traditional English writing studies, this study of Chinese postgraduate students’ English writing is not limited to linguistic and rhetorical issues and focuses more on exploring Chinese international students’ English writing in their postgraduate programmes from a socially constructed perspective. While Chinese students face linguistic challenges in their English writing, this study shows that their experiences in social relations deserve more exploration, as a lack of knowledge of the rules of academic writing in UK universities can lead to much confusion in their writing. Although most

Chinese students have already mastered basic English grammar and vocabulary in China, helping them to understand British society and culture, as well as applying these language skills in real-life social and academic situations, will be more helpful in helping them to adapt to life in the UK quickly (Wu, 2015).

Firstly, Chinese students need to improve their independent thinking skills by participating in academic exchanges and social practices in English academic writing at the graduate level, and have more freedom in their writing to be able to share their personal feelings and experiences. This finding extends the results of existing research on Chinese students' academic writing in English. That is, it focuses not only on students' writing output but also on their independent and critical thinking throughout the writing process; their academic and expressive freedom and their experiences of sharing personal feelings in their writing, which are patterns and approaches to English writing that most students lack during their studies in China. Chinese students need to improve these skills and understand the requirements and standards of assignments in order to meet the requirements and academic expectations of postgraduate study in the UK. For Chinese postgraduate students, meeting the expectations of academic writing in English is not only about using linguistically correct language and communicating ideas but also about completing assignments in a culturally appropriate manner within the specific social and academic context of the UK.

Secondly, Chinese students' experiences of navigating social relations in the writing process also influence their academic outcomes. The academic literacies approach (Lea and Street, 2006) and the concept of writing as a social practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Street, 2003) were used as theoretical lens for understanding Chinese students' English writing. Specifically, this study found that although Chinese postgraduate students did not have an advantage in English proficiency, they were able to mobilise their unique cultural and linguistic capital to navigate English writing expectations. For example, from China's rigorous exam-oriented education system, they acquired basic English vocabulary and grammar, as well as basic learning methods, all of which greatly favoured them in adapting to the British educational system. At the same time, they took advantage of their Chinese student networks and relationships to improve their

academic writing skills in English. In addition, this study shifted from a linguistic model to a social model, exploring how Chinese students' English writing experiences are related to their experiences of navigating social relations in English writing and academic socialisation. This finding also illustrates the intersection of social relations, academic writing and the enhancement of students' self-directed learning, thus identifying the unique needs of Chinese students in meeting English academic writing requirements.

Academic culture shock encountered by Chinese postgraduate students in the UK included unfamiliar demands for independent and critical thinking in writing practices, a high degree of autonomy in the multi-level writing process, and expectations to share personal feelings and ideas in social and academic settings. Thus, Chinese postgraduate students must actively confront and manage academic culture shock in order to adapt to their postgraduate studies in the UK and further their success in English writing.

Chinese students must also face a number of new academic writing expectations in their postgraduate studies in the UK and overcome a number of social and cultural differences to navigate and further meet these new writing demands. Thus, participants in the study were asked about the academic culture shock they had to face: the impacts of the two aspects, critical and independent thinking and freedom to write, were intertwined in their experience. This study found that instead of following a template for writing or writing only to suit the preferences of their tutors, the focus on and promotion of critical thinking and independent thinking for students gave them more autonomy in many ways. As a result, autonomy and independent learning provide students with the opportunity to explore their subject matter in depth, incorporate their own critical thinking, and express their own feelings and opinions in the writing process. As previously analyzed in this study, the cultural capital and writing requirements that are highly valued in Chinese academic culture do not correspond to the academic requirements of their postgraduate programmes in the UK. In dealing with academic culture shock, the Chinese postgraduate students in this study were gradually able to improve their English writing skills and become more integrated into the UK learning environment.

Although the participants in the present study responded that the new academic writing requirements and assessment criteria in English posed many difficulties and challenges, they were able to adapt to the UK mode of study by adopting a range of strategies. In this research, Chinese students felt that in their previous English training, there was no emphasis on critical and independent thinking and writing and that they generally had to follow a format in their writing rather than having the freedom to write as they did in the UK. Apart from the freedom to use different academic writing patterns, they also reported the freedom to express their thoughts and values. This study has shown that Chinese students' studies in the UK transformed from initial limited engagement with social practices (Lave and Wenger, 1991) into fuller engagement with academic writing. Their roles shifted from novice writers with a little understanding of writing expectations to more comfortable participants in the writing discourse community, striving to meet the demands of their tutors and schools. Although this process can be difficult for Chinese students, as they become more involved in English writing, they do gradually improve their ability to think independently and critically, become familiar with the conventions of academic writing in their new environment, and improve their English writing skills. In summary, Chinese students' changing perceptions of academic culture shock and new modes of English writing suggest that they are being socialized and encouraged to engage more appropriately and fully with the writing practices of their communities. In so doing, they are able to adapt to the modes of writing required by their respective courses.

9.5.2 Managing social relationships

Another major issue for Chinese students cannot be having to negotiate social relationships they in their English writing practices. Firstly, students are concerned about violating British rules of engagement in their interactions with others. Many students worry that their communication with others will be perceived to be rude or cause misunderstanding or offense due to cultural differences. For example, disagreeing with a tutor or offering advice to a peer may be perceived as rudeness or a nuisance to others. Therefore, Chinese students often feel disadvantaged and feel the need to be cautious in their communication, due to language differences and a lack of understanding of the rules of social interaction in the UK. This study also challenges the

previous literature suggesting that Chinese students are reluctant to debate and express their views in group activities due to the influence of Chinese traditional culture and because of their lack of confidence in their own language expression. In this study, students were neither silent nor passive in their writing communities. Indeed, many were keen to participate in group discussions, actively express their ideas, and provide critical feedback and input into group writing, as part of completing their assignments.

The relationship between students and tutors and the role of the tutor in the process of writing assignments creates some difficulties for Chinese students. Interactions between them can be problematic due to their different cultural backgrounds and this can undermine Chinese students' ability to engage effectively with their assignments. In addition, studying in the UK requires students to be self-motivated and capable of learning independently and thinking critically. So for example, tutors in the UK will help and guide students with their assignments and provide them with advice and feedback when asked for it. However, many Chinese students are not good at expressing their own opinions or questioning their tutors. Instead, they expect their tutors to instruct them exactly in what they should do so that then they can follow their tutor's advice. This is the role that tutors have in their Chinese university. Chinese students take time to adapt to the UK model of interacting with tutors where the student is expected to seek their assistance at various stages of writing assignments. Building a good relationship with their tutors and maintaining ongoing effective communication helps them to develop their writing.

Many studies have shown that social interaction affects the effectiveness and quality of students' learning (Hamidah et al., 2009). By interacting and communicating with others one not only acquires knowledge but creates connections which then mean that help can be sought when needed. At the beginning of their studies in the UK, Chinese students are unaware of the importance of interacting and communicating with others in the process of completing their academic assignments. However, through a series of writing exercises, they gradually realise that academic writing has expanded from a consideration of the text to the concept of writing as a practice. Chinese postgraduate students need to consider the readers of their assignments during their writing, explore ways and means of communicating with teachers and peers, and,

in particular, learn how to communicate politely by email, something they will be unfamiliar with. The findings of this study extend previous research findings that identify difficulties with the linguistic aspects of students' academic writing in English and provide evidence that social relationships are as important in navigating their studies in the UK. By nurturing multiple levels of social relationships, their ability to improve academic writing in English is enhanced.

9.6 Strategies and resources for Chinese students to improve their English writing

The third finding concerns how the resources of peer support, lecturer feedback and university support, as well as Chinese students' self-directed learning and motivation, have affected their academic writing in English. and how Chinese and the UK universities should improve their educational models to help Chinese students better prepare for (in China) and integrate (in the UK) into the Western academic environment. This study confirms the findings of existing literature on the strategies and resources that exist for students to develop their writing practices. Key resources include lecturer feedback, peer support and university support while a key strategy is to learn to be more self-directed.

The participants' responses indicate that they relied on the constructive and critical feedback from their tutors in order to identify their shortcomings and were motivated to use this feedback in order to improve their academic writing in English. They expressed their desire to participate in the courses offered by their department and master the requirements and criteria for academic writing in English in the UK through one-to-one tutorials with their lecturers. Self-directed learning and strong motivation to learn were regarded as important factors affecting their ability to meet the writing requirements. In addition, the study found that Chinese students' social interactions and relationships in the UK played an important role in improving their writing skills. For example, interaction with peers, especially native English speakers, enabled them to gain a better understanding of British society and culture and acquire more accurate English expressions, which gave them more confidence in the academic context. Also, the resources and in-session programmes provided by their department helped them to understand the academic writing expectations and criteria of their course of study, as well as general improvement of their writing skills. These findings challenge the traditional one-size-fits-all

approach to writing support for all students and calls on UK higher education institutions to take into account the unique backgrounds of Chinese postgraduate students when providing writing support.

This research reflects the tensions and disconnects between the resources and support provided by higher education institutions and the unique needs of Chinese postgraduate students, which are different from those of students from other countries. Although the Chinese postgraduate students in this study were able to use a variety of resources and strategies in their English writing, they generally felt that feedback from lecturers and support from the university needed to be more focused on the specific learning needs of Chinese students. Providing support for Chinese postgraduate students based on the needs of mainstream UK students does not meet their unique requirements and needs. For example, although writing courses and various writing workshops were provided in this university, many students were reluctant to attend because the form and content, mainly discussion-based, often failed to meet their unique needs in terms of writing. Students did not feel that these activities are efficient in improving their academic writing skills.

Many Chinese students reported that they preferred a teacher-centered mode of delivery because it allowed them to gain more knowledge and information in a limited amount of time. Therefore, by providing international students with various writing resources such as courses and lectures that are suitable for them, UK universities can help them to master the modes and methods of academic writing in English and help them overcome the academic culture shock. At the same time, Chinese universities should actively engage with the world's education sector and work in different directions to develop students' academic skills and improve their academic writing in English.

9.6.1 Improving students' self-directed learning skills

As the Chinese saying goes, give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. In the academic context, this suggests that the aim of schooling should not only be to impart knowledge but also to develop students' ability to learn

independently, improve their ability to think independently and manage themselves, and provide them with the skills and abilities needed for independent learning in the future. Developing students' independent learning skills is, therefore, one of the most important means of helping students engage in long-term self-improvement. Similarly, student independence should be maximised in the teaching and learning of English at the UK university. This includes encouraging students to engage in social interactions, group projects, and academic communities to enhance their learning through practical experiences and peer support. To be more specific, students should establish learning objectives, formulate learning plans, and choose a learning style that suits their needs according to their actual circumstances. While taking the initiative to accumulate professional knowledge, they should also enhance their motivation and confidence in learning and actively seek help in order to achieve academic success.

9.6.1.1 Acquiring professional knowledge and methods of writing in English

This study found that students' lack of disciplinary knowledge was one of the causes of their difficulties with academic writing in English. A lack of background knowledge and expertise affects students' ability to engage with the academic literature in English. Therefore, it is crucial for students to engage in collaborative learning environments, participate in academic discussions, and seek feedback from peers and mentors to build their disciplinary knowledge through social practice. At the same time, a lack of knowledge about academic writing in English can affect their performance. It is, therefore, necessary for students to be better prepared for their studies by learning relevant knowledge before they start their postgraduate studies. It is also important for them to take more initiative in their postgraduate studies to learn about themselves and develop their writing skills through self-study and exploration.

Chinese students' lack of background knowledge and writing knowledge is the result of several factors. Firstly, students report that what they have learnt at the undergraduate level in China does not match with what they are expected to know in their postgraduate studies in the UK. Thus, they are faced with an entirely new body of knowledge in the UK. Secondly, lecturers sometimes cite examples from Western countries in class that are unfamiliar to Chinese students.

Thirdly, there is a lack of academic writing-related courses in Chinese universities. Although English courses in Chinese universities are under the transition from EGP to EAP, most students have not received systematic training in academic writing in English.

with regard to EGP, in the Chinese classroom the focus is more on vocabulary, grammar and sentence fluency. That is to say, students practice basic English application skills, with little attention paid to students' critical thinking, logic or essay structure. Fourthly, Chinese students do not realise the importance of academic writing for their postgraduate studies in the UK. This is because in Chinese universities, they are assessed in the form of closed-book examinations. Therefore, in addition to academic writing courses and the various forms of academic support provided within the UK university, Chinese students need to learn the relevant knowledge on their own, according to their needs and actively communicate and discuss with their tutors and peers.

9.6.1.2 Improving motivation, especially self-directed learning

Regardless of the difficulties faced, what is more important than the skills to overcome them is the motivation to overcome them (Nietzsche). One of the most important strategies for promoting independent learning and improving the ability to learn is to strengthen students' motivation. This can be achieved by creating a supportive learning environment that encourages peer interaction, collaborative projects, and active participation in academic communities, which in turn fosters a sense of belonging and motivation. A lack of learning motivation can have several causes. At the undergraduate level, Chinese students are only required to take a series of English exams such as the CET-4 and CET-6, which are composed of multiple-choice questions, reading comprehension and a 150-word essay. This results in the fact that Chinese undergraduate students only focus on vocabulary and grammar without paying much attention to writing. In addition, Chinese students are rarely asked to express themselves through writing as this is not a requirement in Chinese universities. Therefore, Chinese students are not motivated to write in English for academic purposes due to examination-oriented teaching approaches and lack of practice.

Moreover, the role of the learning environment in universities in enhancing students' motivation to write in English should not be overlooked. This study found that Chinese students' motivation to write academically increased significantly after they were integrated into the UK learning environment, owing to the surrounding environment and learning atmosphere, as well as the influence of the UK assessment requirements. Therefore, Chinese universities can learn from the UK's approaches to teaching and assessment to increase students' enthusiasm and motivation for academic writing, thus promoting their motivation for independent learning and independent thinking. By reforming the teaching of English in Chinese universities, Chinese students would be better prepared for academic writing at the undergraduate level, which would also enhance their motivation and self-confidence and thus lay a solid foundation for their postgraduate studies in the UK.

9.6.1.3 Improving self-confidence and actively seeking assistance

The interviews with the participants in this study suggest that having self-confidence can positively impact Chinese students' ability to achieve good academic results. Building self-confidence can be facilitated through active engagement in academic communities, receiving constructive feedback from peers and mentors, and participating in social and academic activities that promote a supportive learning environment. Many previous studies have examined the relationship between self-confidence and academic writing ability and showed a strong relationship between the two (Akbari and Sahibzada, 2020). This study has shown that the participants' lack of self-confidence derived from their previous learning experiences, which had many negative effects on their academic writing at the postgraduate-level in the UK. Firstly, the Chinese education system promotes fill-in-the-blank pedagogy and a lecture-based teaching model that turns students into passive recipients of knowledge, which leads to their heavy dependence on tutors. This reliance on tutors and respect for authority results in a lack of independence in learning and critical thinking skills.

Secondly, Chinese students' lack of confidence may be related to a lack of academic English writing practice. Since most Chinese students receive no English writing practice or training at the undergraduate level, a lack of understanding of academic writing in English leads to their

lack of confidence at the postgraduate-level. Finally, a low level of proficiency in the target language also affects L2 learners' writing skills and self-confidence. When students encounter difficulties in writing assignments, they become frustrated and need to spend more time checking the application of language in their assignments. Therefore, L2 learners should learn and actively seek assistance from their tutors and peers in the process of academic writing. By familiarising themselves with the L2 writing model, they can improve their writing skills and thus enhance their confidence. This will increase students' willingness to share their writing with others and thus obtain more feedback and suggestions.

I have argued that English language teaching in Chinese universities is currently not conducive to the improvement of students' academic English language skills. They find that the skills valued in the Chinese context do not help them in the UK context and stop them from reaching their learning goals and academic achievements. However, at the same time, students need to take some responsibility for the building of self-confidence. They should take the initiative to increase their interest and motivation in independent learning and increase their academic level as one of the most effective ways to build self-confidence. Therefore, course designers need to adapt and improve their courses according to students' needs and interests. Curriculum designers in Chinese universities should consider internationalising curricula. In this way, students can be exposed to and master academic English as early as possible. Academic writing in English should be seen by students and teachers not simply as a skill to be acquired in order to make progress but as a useful learning tool.

9.6.1.4 Dealing with Cultural Transfer Positively

Some cultural transfers may hinder the progress and development of Chinese students' academic writing in English. In the present study, cultural transfer in academic writing can be the transfer of elements such as students' attitudes towards learning, writing characteristics, ways of thinking, and the social knowledge used by them to explain their ideas. Addressing these challenges requires integrating students into academic communities, encouraging participation in cross-cultural discussions, and fostering an environment where they can share and reflect on their experiences. Many studies have investigated the effects of cultural transfer

and first language on Chinese students' English writing. For example, Song (2020) stated that due to the differences between Chinese and Western modes of thinking and the negative transfer of Chinese, Chinese students are more likely to use Chinese English expressions in their English writing. Therefore, Chinese students should actively confront such cultural differences and try to get rid of Chinese-styled writing in their English writing to improve their English writing skills.

Studies have shown that the differences between Chinese and Western modes of thinking are gradually narrowing in recent years. However, it is difficult for Chinese students to change some inherent basic patterns of thinking under the influence of traditional culture. As a result, a negative transfer of some cultural elements occurs from L1 to L2 academic writing. This is due to several factors. Firstly, Western culture allows people to express their views and ideas freely. Thus, thinking about issues is more flexible and free in this cultural context. The traditional Chinese culture, on the other hand, controls people's thinking and believes that Chinese people must behave by the rules. Growing up in this traditional Chinese educational culture, Chinese students are accustomed to the lectures of teachers being the main source of knowledge and are rarely able or willing to express their own views when receiving this knowledge. In addition, Chinese assessment tends to consist of examinations that rely on memorising information and knowledge instead of being encouraged to question and innovate. Therefore, when studying in the UK, Chinese students are required to increase their critical awareness and learn to think and write in a Western way of thinking.

Secondly, during the writing process, Chinese students tend to think and analyze their ideas in their mother tongue and then translate them into English, which may result in poor expression of their viewpoints and non-compliance with English writing norms (Zhang, 2016). This view is consistent with the findings of this study, where some of the participants reported that they used translation as a compensatory strategy. In addition, although they would double-check grammar and word choice before submitting assignments, the sentence structure and overall English writing style were often problematic, which was related to their thinking habits.

Thirdly, a lack of knowledge about Western culture can also create difficulties in Chinese students' English writing. British teachers often cite examples of Western society in their classes or assign writing tasks with Western society as the background, which creates difficulties for Chinese students. The topic of writing influences students' decisions and directions of thinking and can enable students to form opinions and positions and integrate these into their writing (Zhang, 2018). Therefore, students' lack of social knowledge and background knowledge of their relevant subjects hinders them from thinking and judging the topic, which is, in turn, reflected in their writing.

Fourthly, as mentioned in the previous section, students' learning motivation and confidence are important factors that influence their learning outcomes. In the present study, however, the participants showed a negative attitude towards the complexity of writing in English, especially in the early stages. They struggled with the requirement to demonstrate their knowledge and present their opinions through independent thinking and critical thinking, which was very frustrating. Students found it difficult to express their views and attitudes fluently and clearly in unfamiliar writing topics due to a combination of lack of background knowledge and language difficulties.

In response to the challenges posed by cultural transfer and its negative impact on Chinese students' writing, Chinese students can improve their academic writing in English by learning English writing patterns, developing English thinking patterns, and enhancing their background knowledge. Alongside expanding their English vocabulary and expressions, Chinese students should actively integrate into the UK academic environment and atmosphere, especially with native English speakers, which will also help to boost their motivation and self-confidence. Feeling comfortable about asking for help from others, especially tutors, can help to overcome the academic challenges they encounter. The guidance and teaching approaches of lecturers and tutors play a crucial role in helping Chinese students to overcome their academic difficulties in English writing. Thus, the following section will focus on the role played by tutors in the process of students dealing with English writing difficulties.

9.6.2 Guidance and support from Chinese teachers

In response to students' need to improve their academic skills, the Chinese Ministry of Education has introduced Guidelines for College English Teaching, which stipulates that teachers should place more emphasis on EAP than EGP in teaching English in higher education (Cai, 2015). However, this policy has not been effectively implemented in Chinese universities due to the fact that the development of EAP teaching in China faces many challenges. For example, university English teachers in China do not have sufficient knowledge about EAP teaching and have been accustomed to EGP teaching, focusing on maximising students' scores in exams (Zhang, 2018). As a result, in the early stages of the EAP reform, teachers lacked confidence and were unable to cope with this paradigm shift. In addition, EAP teaching in China is still in its infancy, lacks standardised curriculum materials and thus has failed to improve students' academic English skills sufficiently (Cai, 2017). Chinese teachers may therefore wish to consider placing more emphasis on training students' critical thinking and independent thinking skills but based on the traditional teaching model. They could guide students to read English and encourage them to express their ideas through English writing. They could also scaffold students' critical thinking and writing skills by offering them feedback.

9.6.2.1 Traditional teaching models of Chinese teachers

In recent years, an increasing number of English teachers in China have realized that the traditional model of teaching English does not meet the needs of their students (Wang and Qian, 2020). Despite some students' high scores in English exams, fluent oral English and understanding of Western culture, they are unable to apply English appropriately in their professional studies, especially in academic English writing (Cai, 2015). As a result, some of China's top universities have started to provide EAP elective courses to help improve students' academic writing skills in English (Zhang, 2018). Furthermore, the China English for Academic Purposes Association (CEAPA), established in 2015, provides English teachers in China with the opportunity to exchange information and learn from each other in order to increase the level of EAP teaching in Chinese higher education. However, teachers' traditional perceptions of their role and lack of teaching materials have led to many difficulties and challenges in the

development of EAP teaching in China. The teaching practices of English teachers in China are influenced by traditional Chinese educational models and their past educational experiences.

In the traditional “banking model of education” (Freire, 1970), teachers are endowed with too much power in the educational process, which hinders the development of students’ independent thinking habits: students who put forward their own opinions can be seen as challenging the authority of the teacher. As a result, the current educational system in China before and at university level is still characterized by the memorisation of knowledge, which is manifested in English teaching as the memorisation of words, grammar rules, etc. Although lecturers of other courses also focus on knowledge input, allowing students to acquire specialist and subject knowledge, they generally believe that students’ independent thinking skills and independent learning are not effectively exercised and developed (Chen and Hu, 2018). That is to say, Chinese teachers encourage students to remember what they have learnt rather than stimulating them to think critically.

In addition, the Chinese context not only dictates the syllabus and assessment system, that is the examination-oriented nature of the education system, but also limits the development of teachers. Some of the participants in this study indicated that although some of their teachers advocated for students to express their own opinions before and at the university level in China, under the assessment system in China, only those who are able to memorize large amounts of information can achieve good results, regardless of their levels of knowledge. The focus of teaching is therefore, on maximising the input and memorisation of knowledge, leaving little time and energy for them to improve their thinking and creative skills. In English writing, teachers instruct students in the acquisition of their knowledge of words and grammar, on the one hand, and the memorisation of writing templates, on the other hand, in order to write the 150-word essays that are a requirement in examinations. This explains why Chinese students learn English for high marks in examinations rather than the understanding and application of the target language. Teachers should respond positively to the national policy for improving teaching methods and assessment and focus on developing students’ critical thinking and

reasoning skills alongside their acquisition of knowledge. This will motivate students to exercise dialectical thinking while facing the pressures of examinations.

9.6.2.2 Encouraging students to read in the target language

The participants in this study highlighted their lack of reading practice both in L1 and L2 as an important factor in their difficulties with academic writing in English. Inadequate reading can adversely affect students' thinking patterns and writing levels (Fareed et al., 2016). Although students are encouraged to read extensively before and during their undergraduate education in China, due to the assessment system, students prefer to spend time improving their exam performance and neglect reading (Huang, 2015). Continuing their high school study habits and still relying on teachers' lectures as the main means of acquiring knowledge, most students also fail to make full use of library during their undergraduate studies (Li and Wang, 2019). Therefore, Chinese students are unprepared for UK university studies where reading and writing are far more important, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. In addition, current research has found that students' reading patterns and habits are linked to Chinese teaching methods and assessment systems, particularly in English reading. As Gao (2006) claimed, reading is not emphasized or used as a source of knowledge for English learning in China but as part of the examinations for students to learn ways of answering reading comprehension questions in order to achieve high marks. This is included in all stages of English exams in China, including the IELTS exam.

Current research shows that Chinese postgraduate students' lack of reading habits is one of the factors leading to their problems with academic writing in English (Heng, 2018). Therefore, tutors and students should focus on reading essays and academic texts to improve the quantity and quality of input. Many existing studies have highlighted the effectiveness of reading academic papers and articles to improve students' English academic writing skills (Bailey, 2017).

The participants in this study mentioned that their UK tutors provided them with essay samples to ensure that they had a visual understanding of how to structure their essays, construct their

arguments and express their ideas. The assignment samples provided by the tutors offered students an excellent illustration of academic English writing that could be used as a guide for constructing their own academic assignments. The participants also reported that reading the literature and related books recommended by their teachers during their postgraduate studies in the UK, helped them broaden their horizons and reflect more on what they were studying so that they could better structure their writing and express their ideas more clearly and logically.

Previous research has confirmed the inextricable relationship between reading and writing skills. The present study has also shown that reading and writing complement each other and that reading contributed significantly to the improvement of students' academic writing skills (Wallace and Wary, 2021). Therefore, teachers in Chinese universities should encourage students to read extensively, especially academic literature related to their majors, stimulate their thinking. They should be given the opportunity to summarise what they have read and express their understanding and reflections on the content, through writing. Moreover, they should be inspired to read appropriate literature and thus realise comprehensible input, which can be integrated into their own knowledge system, thus expanding their knowledge and improving their academic skills.

In addition, Chinese students in the UK should strive to integrate into the UK learning and academic environment, read literature under the guidance of their tutors, and improve their reading and writing skills to meet UK academic requirements and standards. Students can demonstrate their current academic levels by interacting with teachers and other students, which will facilitate teachers' identification of students' ZPD and, on the other hand, enable teachers to note students' mistakes and shortcomings and then give corrective feedback and comments.

9.6.2.3 Encouraging students to practice English writing and offering guidance

Despite the increasing emphasis on student autonomy and independent learning, the guidance provided by teachers, tutors and lecturers, whether physical or virtual, is unlikely to disappear and is of great importance to students' academic improvement. Teaching and mentoring remain the most important part of most learning systems. In the university context, the comments and

feedback of tutors and lecturers play a critically important role in improving students' academic writing. Berk (2001) stated that the teacher is responsible for helping students expand their knowledge and accomplish additional tasks so that they can develop a variety of skills. In the context of writing in a second language, scaffolding allows learners to obtain guidance from their teachers to focus on what they need to acquire (Wood et al., 1976).

This study found that Chinese students' writing difficulties mainly result from a lack of effective writing practice. At the postgraduate-level in the UK, writing is one of the most important skills as most courses are assessed in writing. The completion of high-quality assignments demonstrates that learners have acquired a high level of proficiency in the target language and can express their ideas clearly. Chinese students' insufficient writing practice can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, in China, all subjects except Chinese language courses are assessed by means of examinations that mostly require students to choose the correct option and answer factual questions rather than writing and proving their point of view through argumentation.

Secondly, since the English writing syllabus in Chinese universities emphasizes the memorisation of grammatical rules, English teachers in China focus more on the application of vocabulary and grammar in English writing rather than requiring students to think critically or present novel and valuable ideas. Moreover, Chinese students are rarely required to write long essays or papers during their undergraduate studies. As a result, many students prepare for examinations by memorising essay templates, becoming accustomed to applying them in any context they are required. This writing model obscures the nature of writing as a communication skill, resulting in a lack of opportunity to think critically through writing.

This study found through student interviews that two of the best ways to improve students' writing skills included practising writing more frequently and correcting and refining their own writing through tutor guidance. University tutors can understand students' input and output through their interactions with students, which can help them understand students' ZPD and then provide appropriate scaffolding support. The participants in this study commented that it was due to the step-by-step guidance and feedback from their tutors during their studies in the

UK that they were able to adapt quickly to the academic writing model in UK universities. If Chinese university teachers also adopted this model of teaching and assessment, Chinese students would benefit more from their undergraduate studies. At the same time, English teaching in Chinese universities needs to focus not only on grammatical rules but also on writing as a social and cultural act and view students' effective use of language as an important pedagogical goal. Therefore, the traditional teaching model centered around grammatical rules in China needs to be combined with the improvement of students' ability to use the target language so that Chinese students are connected to international academia and can understand and learn from the perspectives and findings of researchers in other countries.

9.6.3 University and Educational Institutions support

The teaching and learning strategies of schools and the policies and programmes developed by educational institutions impact on teaching and learning at a macro level (Kirkpatrick, 2003). Therefore, the teaching standards set and the range of measures adopted by schools to facilitate students to achieve academic success plays a very significant role in raising the academic standards of students. With the development of the economy and the globalization of education, an increasing number of Chinese students realise the importance of improving their academic skills and keeping up with the latest academic developments, with students trying to find out about the latest academic developments and relevant information from websites and academic journals. However, although many Chinese students who have been learning English since primary school are able to achieve high scores in a variety of English examinations, it is quite difficult for them to understand highly-specialised texts and academic writing in English can be very challenging. Increasingly, Chinese English teachers are also increasingly aware that the traditional English teaching model cannot satisfy the needs of their students (Ye and Liu, 2013). As a result, Chinese universities and education authorities are increasingly stressing that more emphasis should be placed on EAP rather than EGP in the teaching of English in colleges and universities; however, the lack of experienced teachers and unified curriculum materials has led to teachers needing to continue to explore and research in the early stages of reform. EAP

teaching is still at the stage of trial and error, with a lack of professional teachers hindering progress in many ways.

9.6.3.1 Strengthening teacher training

From the data obtained, it can be seen that the majority of Chinese postgraduate students believe that their students' lack of English language proficiency is related to the way that the English language is taught in China and the weak performance of Chinese teachers. According to students, many popular foreign textbooks for teaching English in higher education have been introduced. In some universities, excellent teaching teams are hired to organize academic lectures and guide teachers to cultivate international talents for the trend of globalization. However, Chinese teachers and students still attach greater importance to English language examination results, such as on students' performance in College English Test (CET-4 and CET-6). Because passing CET-4 or even CET-6 has become a mandatory requirement for graduation, teachers do not have sufficient motivation or capacity to utilise these resources effectively to carry out curriculum reform. As a result, teachers continue to teach using an overly traditional, teacher-centered approach rather than a learning-centered approach. There is insufficient awareness of EAP and over-reliance on a lecture-based approach, leading to teachers teaching exam-related content at the expense of students' practical application of English. English teachers in Chinese higher education institutions tend to teach general English for years and focus needs to be placed on changing teachers' perceptions and making them aware that EAP teaching will be a future trend in English teaching in higher education in terms of in-service teacher training (Cai and Liao, 2010).

Reforms therefore also need to target English teacher trainees by introducing them how to teach EAP courses effectively. Experienced teachers should also participate in this type of training programme as part of their continued professional development. However, it is not easy for universities to provide professional training in EAP to all teachers in a short period of time. In addition, English teachers usually do not have a professional background in other subjects. EGP teachers are sometimes unable to help students solve their problems for the lack of domain-specific knowledge (Cai and Liao, 2010). Therefore, there is an urgent need for English teachers

in Chinese universities to receive effective training in the EAP teaching model, expertise or qualifications in teaching writing skills and improve the deficiencies in their teaching methods so as to develop students into excellent English learners.

In addition to the training of English teachers, it is also important to train teachers of various subjects who have had overseas study experiences. This study indicates that the improvement of Chinese students' performance during their postgraduate studies in the UK does not only depend on their participation in writing courses but is also inextricably linked to the assistance provided within their specific subject areas. There is an increasing number of teachers with overseas study experience in Chinese universities who are encouraged by universities to help students in the same subject area to improve their academic reading, expression and writing skills (Han and He, 2013). Although these teachers are not professional English teachers, their experience and advice can help students in specific disciplinary areas. This is because these teachers with overseas study experience are not only professionally competent but also have rich experience in the use of academic English.

9.6.3.2 Enhancing educational equity and tailoring teaching to students' circumstances

In the interviews with students, students who had attended top universities in China or universities in developed cities, reported that their universities and tutors had been making efforts to develop EAP programmes. Some undergraduate teachers of professional courses were capable of teaching English. However, most universities have been unable to promote EAP teaching due to a lack of funding and faculty awareness. For example, Han and He (2013) claimed that the development of education in China and the severely unbalanced distribution of educational resources have resulted in significant differences in the level of university development among regions. Faced with the fact that some universities do not have the resources and funding to develop alternative EAP courses or train teachers who are able to deliver EAP courses, some researchers have argued that education departments and schools can attempt to develop some online courses to help students in different universities and different regions of China so as to improve their academic English. For example, Tsinghua University has designed two online academic English courses (Zhang et al., 2011), one combines academic

reading and writing and the other combines listening and speaking course, both with four levels. These online courses will go some way to addressing the shortage of EAP teachers and give students from different regions and disciplines the opportunity to receive academic English training. Online EAP courses are believed to bring many benefits to universities and students. Firstly, it has the potential to address the problem of the lack of EAP teachers in universities (Zhang et al., 2011). Students can acquire advanced and comprehensive knowledge via the Internet rather than through traditional classroom instruction. Secondly, these online courses mean that it is not just students at top universities that have access to advanced online materials (Cai, 2015). Thirdly, students have more flexibility compared to traditional face-to-face teaching and can select the right course in accordance with their needs, repeating a lesson several times if needed (Smart and Cappel, 2006).

However, although online courses can indeed help students improve their academic English skills, it should also be noted that such courses have many disadvantages. Firstly, compared with face-to-face teaching, students cannot get immediate feedback from tutors (Summers *et al.*, 2005). Secondly, online education requires students to better manage their time (Cai, 2015) and watch videos carefully without supervision. Thirdly, in terms of academic writing, watching videos is only a part of the learning process, and students still need to strengthen their writing practice (*ibid.*). Despite these drawbacks, there is no denying that taking online courses has promoted students' academic English proficiency to some extent. Chinese universities can develop a new form of teaching suitable for the current situation of EAP teaching in China by combining face-to-face teaching with online courses. For example, students can learn via video and then send questions via email or make an appointment with the limited number of EAP teachers at their university for one-on-one tutoring (Zhang et al., 2011). In this way, the limited number of EAP teachers at the university only need to attend to specific issues that arise during the self-directed learning process of students.

Chinese universities could create a similar teaching model for EAP teaching, especially English writing, to that in the UK, by learning from some universities in the UK. The students interviewed in this study reported that the UK model of academic education was very helpful

to them. For example, to help students who are about to study at a UK university improve their language knowledge and skills, AEP (Academic English for Postgraduate Students) pre-sessional courses are provided by the Language Centre. Student can attend six-week and ten-week groups, suitable for students of all levels, which are designed to help students to gain academic English skills such as essay writing, note-taking and presentations.

However, although the courses and related lectures offered by the university to help to improve their academic English skills, particularly writing skills, these courses still have shortcomings. As mentioned in Chapter 8, some of the EAP courses offered are generic, without giving tailored guidance on the academic requirements of different disciplines. Simply taking an EAP course is not enough to improve academic English writing skills, such as the correct use of academic vocabulary, the ability to think critically, and the ability to express one's ideas in precise language while writing. Therefore, in addition to the deficiencies in Chinese students' use of English, teachers in the UK should also consider the cultural challenges that Chinese students have to overcome. Only in this way can teachers identify students' ZDP and give Chinese students the effective assistance to help them achieve the level of English required for academic success. However, it is undeniable that students need to improve their approach to self-study and actively communicate with their tutors to express their needs and ideas so that teachers can understand their students better and provide them with corrective guidance.

To sum up, in order to improve Chinese students' academic writing skills and enhance their engagement with post graduate study in the UK, Chinese universities should develop students' English language proficiency levels at the undergraduate level and improve their independent learning skills. Students need to be prepared both linguistically and academically, thereby improving their comfort and academic performance in an unfamiliar academic environment and enabling them to deal positively with the challenges of cultural transfer. UK universities, meanwhile, need to understand the English language proficiency levels and unique learning needs of Chinese students. It is important to help Chinese students cope with language challenges while providing an understanding of UK academic requirements and assessment

criteria, as well as helping students adapt to the UK academic writing environment as quickly as possible.

9.6.3.3 Encouraging students to actively seek help

As revealed by the data in this study, Chinese students do actively seek help from tutors and peers. This is identified as one of the most important strategies for them to cope with difficulties in academic writing. Students report that success at the postgraduate-level depended on their ability to read, analyze and think critically about the views and opinions of others, and express their academic opinions. However, as mentioned in Chapter 5, due to language barriers and cultural factors, some Chinese students are reluctant to engage in peer interaction and feel nervous about communicating with their tutors. Nevertheless, after a period of study, students found that active participation in the academic environment helped them to improve their academic skills and meet academic requirements.

According to the interviews, the support provided to international students had a significantly positive effect on their ability to meet academic expectations. Firstly, the EAP programme and AEP pre-session courses offered by the language centre attached to the university gave students the opportunity to intuitively grasp the English skills needed for their studies. The academic writing programme in particular provided comprehensive guidance for students to help them to navigate their way through the postgraduate programme.

Secondly, many university departments just like Business School promote peer-to-peer communication and one-to-one peer support activities to help Chinese students find study partners, thereby enabling them to better integrate and adapt to the UK learning environment, in both linguistic and cultural terms. Effective peer support facilitates students to help each other based on their learning experiences and facilitates the development of various learning and life skills. A number of department activities bring together students with shared experiences, which allow students to support each other and provides a space where students feel accepted and understood. In terms of peer support, everyone's views and experiences are valued equally, rather than one being seen as more expert than the other. Students are

encouraged to actively communicate with others and learn from each other in a relaxed atmosphere. In addition, it is also important to encourage students to seek help from their tutors as people who know the most about what students are learning and are those who ultimately judge students' assignments. In addition, one-to-one mentoring can also give students the opportunity to choose the help they need to meet academic expectations and requirements.

In summary, Chinese universities could address the current EAP teacher shortage and regional imbalances by: encouraging teachers to participate in relevant training, promoting educational equity across different regions of China; and encouraging students to engage in self-learning through appropriate online courses while encouraging universities to launch high-quality EAP online courses. Students are also encouraged to improve their self-directed learning skills, which will further facilitate improvements to academic English skills, especially writing, as a preparation for students who want to study abroad. The well-established model of UK universities provides international students with very many forms and types of assistance in their studies. Chinese students should actively participate in the assistance provided by the university and seek help when they encounter difficulties, so as to enrich their learning experience and meet academic expectations and requirements.

9.7 Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this study offer several implications for how universities can better support Chinese international students' academic writing development through a critical pedagogical lens. This includes changes in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and institutional policies and practices.

First, writing curricula should be redesigned to center issues of language, power, and identity. This means not just teaching generic skills but engaging students in critical examinations of how academic writing norms are shaped by particular cultural values and ideologies. For instance, courses could include units on contrastive rhetoric (Connor, 1996) that explore different cultural patterns of argumentation and logic. They could also incorporate readings and discussions on linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), translingualism (Canagarajah, 2011),

and anti-racist writing assessment (Inoue, 2015) to help students understand and navigate the politics of language in academia.

Moreover, writing assignments should be designed to validate students' diverse identities and funds of knowledge. This could include autoethnographic writing (Canagarajah, 2012) that allows students to reflect on their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, or research projects that investigate issues relevant to their home contexts. Encouraging students to draw upon their multilingual resources, such as through codemeshing (Canagarajah, 2011) or translation, can also help affirm their linguistic identities and challenge English-only ideologies.

Second, pedagogy should shift from a transmission model of teaching to a more dialogic and co-constructive approach. This means creating spaces for students to actively participate in shaping the curriculum and sharing their expertise. For instance, instructors could invite students to co-design grading rubrics or collaboratively develop writing resources. Peer review activities could be structured to foster cross-cultural dialogue and knowledge exchange among students from diverse backgrounds.

Instructors should also adopt a strengths-based stance that recognizes and builds upon students' prior knowledge and skills. This could involve activating students' metacognitive strategies from their previous language learning experiences, or leveraging their digital literacies for multimodal composing tasks. By positioning students as co-inquirers and co-constructors of knowledge, instructors can help cultivate more agentic and empowered learner identities.

Third, writing assessment practices should be reconceptualized through a critical sociocultural lens. This means moving beyond a narrow focus on linguistic accuracy to consider the complex negotiations of meaning and identity in students' texts. Rubrics should be developed in collaboration with students to reflect their values and goals, and should include criteria that recognize diverse forms of expression and argumentation.

Assessment should also involve ongoing dialogue and reflection rather than just summative evaluation. Instructors can conference with students to discuss their writing processes and provide collaborative feedback. Portfolio assessments can allow students to curate and reflect

on their writing development over time, and showcase their multilingual and multimodal composing abilities.

Furthermore, programmatic assessment policies should be examined for cultural biases and revised to be more inclusive of diverse student populations. For instance, timed writing exams that privilege Western norms of individualism and speedy production could be replaced with more authentic and culturally responsive assessment tasks. Grading policies could incorporate labor-based approaches (Inoue, 2019) that value students' effort and engagement rather than just their products.

Fourth, institutions should enact policies and practices that create more equitable and inclusive learning environments for international students. This includes providing targeted writing support services, such as bilingual tutoring, discipline-specific workshops, and intercultural communication training for faculty and staff. International student orientations should include sessions on navigating cultural differences in academic norms and expectations.

Moreover, universities should diversify their curricula and faculty to reflect the global composition of their student bodies. This means recruiting and retaining more international faculty who can serve as mentors and role models for students, and integrating more non-Western perspectives and texts into course materials. Institutions should also provide professional development for all faculty on culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris and Alim, 2014) and anti-racist approaches to teaching and assessment.

Beyond academic affairs, student support services should attend to the holistic needs of international students, including their social, emotional, and financial wellbeing. This could include peer mentoring programs that connect new students with more experienced international students, or community-building events that celebrate students' cultural heritage. Financial aid and scholarship opportunities should be expanded to alleviate the economic burdens that many international students face.

Ultimately, enacting these changes requires a fundamental shift in institutional culture and values. It means moving beyond a deficit orientation that views international students as

problems to be fixed, and instead embracing them as valuable contributors to the university community. It means interrogating and dismantling the Eurocentric norms and biases that pervade academia, and creating space for more diverse and inclusive modes of knowledge production.

As Wenyi reflected: "Supporting Chinese students' writing is not just about helping us adapt to Western standards, but about transforming those standards to be more inclusive and equitable. It's about recognizing that we have valuable knowledge and perspectives to offer, and that academia can benefit from our presence." By centering international students' voices and experiences, universities can work towards more just and humanizing futures for all.

Of course, this transformative work is not easy or straightforward. It requires ongoing commitment, collaboration, and critical reflexivity from all members of the institution. But as Freire (1970) reminds us, education is always a political act - one that can either reproduce or challenge the status quo. By embracing a critical pedagogical stance, universities can harness the power of education to create more liberatory and empowering possibilities for Chinese international students and beyond.

In the words of Yanan: "I dream of a university where my identity as a Chinese student is not a barrier but a source of strength and pride. Where my writing is not judged solely by Western norms but valued for its unique cultural insights. Where I am not just learning to conform but empowered to transform. This is the kind of education I believe in and will continue to fight for." May this vision guide us forward in the collective struggle for more equitable and just academic futures.

9.8 Summary

This chapter provides answers to the overarching research questions through the data collected. It discusses the difficulties encountered by Chinese students in learning academic English in the UK, particularly in writing academic English, and the factors contributing to these difficulties. In addition, it also elaborates on strategies that can help students cope with the academic challenges and culture shock. Traditional Chinese teaching models of delivery effect

the direction and goals of students' English learning. Moreover, Chinese education and culture influences Chinese students' approach to learning and academic achievement at the postgraduate-level in the UK. In this chapter, the strategies that students, tutors and universities (both in China and in the UK) s can adopt to address the academic challenges students face when coming to attend postgraduate courses in the UK.

Firstly, the lack of autonomous learning affects students' ability to acquire more knowledge so as to satisfy academic requirements. Students need to be made aware of the differences between the two academic cultures in terms of requirements and expectations before they come to the UK. Specifically, they should be aware of the role of writing. Pre-session courses are important for helping students to integrate into the UK academic environment and strengthen their interactions with people in the community so as to navigate the new academic writing expectations. Nonetheless, research has shown that despite being initially disadvantaged in learning and writing in the UK, as they gradually understand the requirements of academic English writing and improve their academic standards, Chinese students can become increasingly comfortable with the challenges and meet the academic requirements, with help from various sources.

Secondly, Chinese students need to be seen as novices in writing practice, and given the support that enables them to move smoothly to the centre of the community through legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Through contact with various members of their community, particularly tutors, peers and native English speakers, they develop from novices to skilled community members, a form of evolving membership (*ibid.*, p. 53). In addition, students' difficulties in their integration into the British community also prompt the analysis of how Chinese universities and teachers help Chinese students improve their English language skills and understanding of the UK academic society in this chapter. This will not only help Chinese students to acquire more expertise, learn about the latest academic developments and adapt to their studies more quickly when they arrive in the UK, but will also contribute to the further development of education and assessment models in Chinese universities.

Chapter 10 Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This study has examined the academic writing experiences of Chinese international postgraduate students in UK universities through the lens of critical pedagogy. The findings reveal that these students navigate a complex set of linguistic, cultural, and epistemological challenges that extend far beyond language proficiency alone. Their experiences illustrate how academic writing is deeply embedded in issues of power, identity, ideology, and institutional norms in higher education.

A critical pedagogical orientation offers a productive framework for rethinking writing support for international students. Rather than attributing students' difficulties to individual shortcomings, this perspective foregrounds the structural inequities, cultural biases, and dominant language ideologies that shape their learning conditions. It highlights the funds of knowledge, linguistic repertoires, and cultural resources that Chinese students bring with them, and it emphasizes the need to mobilize these assets toward more empowering and transformative educational outcomes.

The implications of this research point to the need for a profound re-examination of writing curricula, pedagogies, assessment practices, and institutional policies. Such rethinking involves centering language, power, and identity within the curriculum; adopting dialogic and co-constructive pedagogical approaches; developing culturally responsive and ethically grounded assessment practices; and enacting equity-oriented policies at both programmatic and institutional levels. Crucially, these efforts must move beyond superficial gestures of diversity and embrace sustained commitments to dismantling long-standing systems of inequality within higher education.

Although this work is challenging—requiring discomfort, reflexivity, and a willingness to question entrenched assumptions—it aligns with Giroux's (2020) call for a “language of possibility,” one that imagines more just and inclusive futures for internationalized universities.

The experiences of Chinese students demonstrate this possibility. Despite encountering significant obstacles, many exhibit remarkable resilience, creativity, and agency. They draw upon multilingual and multicultural resources to construct new identities and challenge the limitations of dominant academic discourse. As Chen noted: “I used to think being an international student was a disadvantage. Now I see my perspective can be an advantage—something new to offer.”

Their presence, therefore, should not be framed as a challenge to be managed but as an opportunity to cultivate richer, more globally informed forms of academic knowledge and practice. By centering their voices, universities can move toward more reciprocal, ethical, and transformative models of internationalization.

The remainder of this chapter synthesizes these findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks and literature that guided the study. It outlines the key contributions of the research for students, educators, and institutions, discusses its limitations, and offers recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a reflective account of the researcher’s doctoral journey and its implications for ongoing scholarly and pedagogical practice.

10.2 Summary of the key findings

The academic writing of Chinese postgraduate students is a complex topic, involving not only basic approaches to English writing itself but also multiple layers of social, cultural and linguistic factors. As noted in the literature review chapter, although existing studies shed light on the academic writing of Chinese postgraduate students, the findings of these studies do not fully correspond to the current realities of postgraduate students. They generally fail to address the specific needs and requirements of Chinese postgraduate students in their writing practices. In view of this, the current research set out to investigate the difficulties and challenges of academic writing faced by Chinese postgraduate students studying in a UK university.

It was found that some postgraduate students had difficulties in learning and using appropriate vocabulary and correct grammar, especially when expressing their ideas in context during writing. Also, they lacked sufficient vocabulary to express their ideas coherently and confused

formal and informal words in their writing. In addition, for some students, avoiding plagiarism and paraphrasing when writing, were challenging. Students also faced difficulties when attempting to present a clear progression of ideas and to link these ideas in sentences and paragraphs. Moreover, most participants emphasized that demonstrating critical thinking skills in academic writing was a great challenge for them. The transition to the UK's educational system was seen mainly in terms of the requirement of critical thinking and the need to interpretate ideas. Students struggled to achieve overall clarity in their writing.

The linguistic difficulties encountered in academic English writing can be attributed to a series of factors. Firstly, there are gaps in the English language teaching students receive in China and the proficiency they need in order to engage effectively in their postgraduate studies. The Chinese exam-oriented education model leads to teachers teaching and students learning English in order to pass the exam. While this improves students' basic knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar, it fails to improve the practical ability of students in the application of language skills. These undoubtedly have a negative impact on their ability to write in English for academic purposes.

Secondly, students lack background knowledge and motivation for self-learning concerning the curriculum. English language teaching in China highlights EGP rather than EAP, and thus students do not link their English language learning to specific professional knowledge, resulting in a lack of specialist vocabulary and knowledge of relevant academic backgrounds from other countries. Apart from this, socio-cultural factors are also taken into account, as Chinese students need to adapt to the UK culture while studying in the UK. To integrate into the UK university classroom, they need to actively seek help from their tutors and peers and improve their academic skills in general, especially their academic English writing skills.

The second finding relates to the experience of Chinese postgraduate students in 'academic culture shock' (Gilbert, 2000). Students find they are expected to think independently and have the freedom to write and share their personal feelings in their writing. Existing literature on Chinese students' writing in relation to independent and critical thinking tends to focus on the product rather than the writing process. For Chinese postgraduates, fulfilling the expectations

of academic writing is not just about writing linguistically correct language and communicating ideas, but more importantly, doing so in a culturally appropriate way within a particular social context (Currie and Cray, 2004).

Academic culture shock refers to the expectations for independent and critical thinking in writing practice, the need for a high degree of autonomy on multiple levels for students in the writing process, and the need to share personal feelings and ideas. In this sense, Chinese postgraduate students must understand these cultural expectations and overcome some of the social and cultural differences to navigate and further meet new academic demands. The participants in this study identified critical and independent thinking and freedom of writing as key aspects of academic culture shock. Critical and independent thinking in many ways gives students more autonomy to complete papers based on what they can write and what they think. However, this is a challenge for students who are more familiar with following a fixed format, imitating successful models and writing to a formula. The higher level of autonomy also brings about more opportunities for students to explore their chosen topic in depth, integrate their own independent and critical thinking into the writing process and share their personal feelings and ideas through writing. Therefore, through engaging in these practices, Chinese postgraduate students gradually participate more fully in the social practices of their community.

Navigating this new academic landscape is demanding. Through learning about academic writing patterns and understanding the assessment criteria, in conjunction with continuous practice, students become increasingly familiar with writing in academic English. For example, most students noted in their interviews, that although they had faced many challenges when they first started writing academic assignments in English, as they became more involved in writing, they found they could think more independently and critically. One piece of advice that changed their approach to writing was imagining their audience. Group writing in particular was found to be helpful in navigating the unfamiliar expectations. The Chinese students in this study felt that there was no emphasis on critical and independent thinking and writing in their previous English training, and that they often had to follow a format in their writing rather than having as much freedom as they did in the UK. Moreover, writing in Chinese English lessons

focuses more on grammatical and lexical correctness and does not encourage students to share their own views. This study shown that Chinese postgraduate students' engagement with social practices (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that relate to their academic writing requirements moves from limited to more adequate during their studies in the UK.

Chinese students were able to improve their academic writing through interactions with peers and from the feedback received from tutors. By navigating this new academic culture and the social relationships, students became more familiar with the conventions of academic writing in this new context. For instance, with practice, students were able to move towards independent thinking and expressing their own views without making the essay overly subjective, and transitioned from being novice writers to writing essays that met their tutors' expectations. Thus, this study argues that the participants' changing perceptions of the new academic culture and writing requirements indicate their more thorough engagement with their communities of practice. In this way, Chinese students come to participate more effectively in the social practices of their communities.

The third finding goes beyond the traditional approach to writing, which tends to be limited to linguistic and rhetorical issues. Instead, it views Chinese students' writing experiences as socially constructed within postgraduate programmes and thus includes their experiences of navigating social relationships in the writing process. While Chinese students do face linguistic challenges in their writing, this study clearly demonstrates the importance of their experiences of navigating social relationships, particularly with their lecturers and peers, a finding that contributes to considerations of writing as a social practice (Lave and Wegner, 1991). To be specific, as shown in this study, although Chinese students were disadvantaged in terms of their English language proficiency, they mobilised their unique cultural and linguistic capital to navigate writing expectations. They were able to improve their academic writing by mobilising their social capital. Firstly, this finding indicates the development of Chinese students' writing patterns from a linguistic model to a social model, based on their experiences of writing in relation to their experiences of navigating social relations in writing and academic socialisation. Secondly, it also reflects how m social relations, second language writing, and Chinese students'

psychological and emotional well-being intersect, pointing to their unique needs and demands in navigating the expectations of academic writing.

Students' lack of understanding of their new environment and lack of confidence in how to communicate with others can contribute to difficulties with understanding writing expectations. A major issue that Chinese students cannot avoid is the social relationships embedded in their writing practices. They need to successfully negotiate these relationships without violating their traditions of social interaction. Several previous studies have provided detailed illustrations of how social interactions can affect the quality of one's learning. For example, Ens et al., (2011) claim that using the conversational nature of language and engaging with others in the writing process creates many opportunities for developing relationships and generating knowledge. In this research, the participants reported that early in their studies, they were not prepared to navigate social relationships in writing, but as they became familiar with the writing model, they established relationships with their teachers and peers in unique ways.

Firstly, students needed to meet the expectations and demands of not only their imaginary readers but also their peers and teachers in the same group during writing. Secondly, they needed to explore effective and polite ways of communicating with teachers and peers, specifically, how to avoid conflicts with peers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Students found it challenging to resolve group conflicts when writing collaboratively with people from multicultural backgrounds. As argued by Loi and Evans (2010), strongly criticizing a peer's work may be interpreted as causing embarrassment and bringing shame to the person being criticised. In this research, a lack of confidence in expressing themselves in English, coupled with a lack of understanding of the rules of social relations, caused Chinese students to feel frustrated and afraid to voice their opinions in the early stages of their studies. Carson and Nelson (1996) also point out that given their linguistic and socio-cultural background, Chinese students tend to reflect their perceptions of their vulnerability in group activities and are reluctant to argue with their peers. This finding is closely related to Ritchie and Rigano's (2007) study, which focuses on the complexity of negotiation and the comfort that writers develop with each other through constant interaction.

In addition, Ens et al. (2011) point to the significance of linking individual contributions and feelings to intelligence and the strong need to consider personal development and feelings in a social context. This research's findings extend those of previous research as it not only reveals what it means to understand Chinese students' writing in a social context but also explores the unique ways in which Chinese postgraduate students understand and negotiate these social relationships in their writing. This study also questions the stereotypical image of Chinese students as silent and passive within their writing communities. Chinese students interviewed for this study are assertive and willing to express their ideas. As they have adapted to the UK approach to learning, a group discussion and communication with their tutors, they are keen to provide critical feedback on group writing, do not avoid group conflict, and are increasingly able to convey their feelings and to seek help when needed.

It can thus be inferred that the notion of writing at the postgraduate-level has expanded from a consideration of the text to a notion of writing as practice. As students engage with changes in specific social practices in their writing, navigating multiple levels of social relations to further negotiate the expectations of academic writing, they come to understand more writing requirements. Provision within the university should therefore pay more attention and support to help them navigate group dynamics in their writing and address academic culture shock in a way that fosters their academic English writing skills.

As existing literature on students' strategies and resources in writing practice has found, Chinese postgraduate students use peer support, teacher feedback and institutional support in developing their writing strategies. The participants in this study were asked about the strategies and approaches they used to overcome their academic writing difficulties. They reported that firstly, they needed to read sample essays and journal articles from which they could learn about the structure and writing style, word choice, grammar and language organization of effective academic writing. Secondly, students felt that writing regularly allowed them to practice how to structure paragraphs, express their ideas logically and construct logical arguments. Thus, they could become more familiar with the language, vocabulary and critical style of academic essays. Feedback from tutors and peers played a critical role in improving students' academic

English writing skills. Students used feedback to understand the requirements of academic papers and the tutors' criteria for judging them, so as to identify their own problems and make adjustments accordingly.

In addition, this study found evidence of the impact of their previous learning, social and emotional experiences on their perceptions and navigation of writing expectations in the UK. The shortcomings of English language teaching in China were explored and recommendations for improvement were made, with students indicating that if they had taken an academic English writing course in China and read some academic literature, this would have improved their academic learning skills. Chinese English teachers should also be trained in the content and methods of teaching English for academic purposes so that Chinese students can be guided through a progressive process of understanding and improving their academic writing skills. This would prepare students academically to go to an English-speaking country, thus helping them to adapt more quickly to the teaching and assessment patterns of UK universities and achieve better learning outcomes. It would also improve their academic thinking skills as a whole and bring Chinese higher education in line with the world.

These findings add to the literature examining Chinese students' writing by exploring what postgraduate students in China perceive as constructive writing feedback and support for their writing from diverse sources. Specifically, Chinese students generally expected their lecturers to understand and point out their shortcomings in writing and give them more feedback and advice. In other words, they welcomed constructive and critical feedback. They also felt that collaborative learning was critical and that they could get more input by receiving feedback from their classmates, especially from native English speakers and friends. Furthermore, interacting with peers made students more relaxed than the power relations and pressure they felt when interacting with tutors.

Once they arrive in the UK, participation in a variety of academic writing courses, lectures and seminars allows students to learn the basics of academic writing in a systematic way, and these unique courses compensate for the deficiencies and lack of preparation of Chinese students for academic studies in China. These findings, however, question the traditional one-size-fits-all

approach to writing support for all students and call on UK universities to take into account the unique backgrounds of Chinese postgraduate students when providing writing support, thereby tailoring help to Chinese students. The resources and support provided by higher education institutions sometimes do not always meet the unique needs of Chinese students. For example, the workshops offered were usually in the form of discussions. Many of the new Chinese students were more comfortable with the lecture format and believed that the student discussion format could not allow them to acquire more professional writing knowledge, especially when the entire group was international, and that such discussions were a cultural exchange rather than a good way to learn about professional writing.

These findings echo those of Ferris et al. (2011), who argue that many tutors who teach students writing consider students' language backgrounds to be irrelevant and that they lack training on how to teach students with English as a second language. Though Chinese students were found to be able to use a variety of resources and strategies in their writing, they felt that providing support to Chinese students based solely on the requirements of mainstream UK students did not fulfill their unique needs. Also, even though they were offered writing consultancy services and provided with various writing courses, workshops and lectures, many students were reluctant to use these services because the format and content of these services often did not meet their unique needs in terms of writing. This study, therefore, argues that it is crucial for mutual understanding between the course providers and the students. A model of support that is friendly to international students will help them with their writing difficulties and help them overcome academic culture shock.

Che (2013) shows that students' shared language and culture jointly form the social capital they are able to mobilise. Consistent with the findings of this study, Chinese students enjoyed interacting with and learning from their peers in their academic writing practices, providing insights into how shared language and culture can be utilized effectively to facilitate writing practices. Moreover, it was demonstrated that most students preferred to seek help from their peers from China or other international peers because they understood each other culturally or linguistically. Other students reported that they felt more relaxed when communicating with

tutors from China, although they also used English to communicate with these tutors. As revealed in this research, many Chinese students used their existing social and cultural capital in their initial UK postgraduate studies to make sense of academic culture shock, gaining writing support and advice from familiar peers. The shared language and culture forming their social network helped them to explore and understand the new academic writing requirements.

This study has shown that there are many factors associated with students' academic performance and the individual learner, such as students' motivation and self-directed learning ability which have a significant impact on improving learning effectiveness and academic achievement. As highlighted by Pineteh (2014), taking ownership of the writing process can help students understand that effective academic writing is a process that requires effort. Consequently, Chinese students need to take ownership and responsibility for improving their academic writing. For example, students can read more academic articles in order to learn how to structure their own academic papers, present their ideas, construct logical arguments, organize paragraphs, and make connections between ideas. They can also actively seek help from their tutors, use online resources and library resources and attend relevant training courses the university provides. In addition, they need to engage in searching independently for the information they need, thus promoting their sense of autonomy and reducing their dependence on tutors for all their education.

This section summarises the academic writing challenges faced by Chinese postgraduate students studying in the UK, according to three main themes: how they interact with their tutors and peers; how they learn to meet the new academic writing requirements; and how they seek help and support from different sources. The analysis has highlighted many differences between students' previous learning experiences in China and their learning styles, assessment criteria and interpersonal interactions in the UK. Although these challenges are hard to address in the early stages of study due to a lack of preparation, students quickly adapt to the UK postgraduate study patterns, actively seek help from their schools, tutors and peers and integrate into their new study environment. The purpose of this study is therefore not to paint an overly pessimistic picture of Chinese postgraduate students as disadvantaged in academic writing, nor to criticise

the English language teaching and support models in China or the teaching and learning in UK universities. Rather, it aims to facilitate students and educational institutions to reflect on the unique needs of Chinese postgraduate students. It seems to move current narratives that view Chinese students as passive learners, by using the notion of academic culture shock and the ability to overcome that shock to participate in the academic practices of the university.

In addition, this study has explored how to help English language learners move from being novices in writing practice to the centre through 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which is an evolving form of membership' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 53). This study has reflected on the inadequacies of the English language education model in China and how to develop English for Academic Purposes in Chinese universities, gradually transforming EGP into EAP teaching, to improve the overall academic English proficiency of Chinese students.

10.3 Significance and implications of the Study

Chinese international students constitute the largest and fastest-growing group in UK higher education, making it imperative for universities and writing researchers to develop a deeper understanding of their academic writing experiences and needs. This study extends existing scholarship by providing a nuanced, empirically grounded account of how Chinese postgraduate students navigate academic writing challenges in the UK, and by highlighting both the structural barriers they face and the resources they mobilize in response.

Methodologically, the study employed a comprehensive mixed-methods design—combining a large-scale survey (104 valid responses), semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis of student assignments. The triangulation of these data sources offers a holistic view of Chinese students' writing experiences and reveals the practical realities they encounter beyond what is captured in previous research. By privileging students' voices and personal narratives, this study provides a more textured understanding of how they interpret, negotiate, and respond to academic writing requirements in transnational educational contexts.

The findings contribute to the field in several important ways. First, they underscore the specific linguistic, rhetorical, cultural, and relational challenges that Chinese postgraduate students face when adjusting to UK academic conventions. This includes unfamiliar expectations regarding criticality, academic freedom, argumentation, and social interaction with tutors and peers. Second, the study enriches the literature by examining the social dimensions of academic writing through the theoretical lens of social practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and social capital. It reveals how Chinese students draw on social, cultural, and linguistic capital to support their writing development, and how they perceive themselves as emerging members of UK academic writing communities.

This approach shifts the focus from viewing writing solely as an individual cognitive product to understanding it as a socially situated practice. The study identifies a gap in current scholarship regarding how international students mobilize their social networks and cultural resources to meet writing expectations. By demonstrating how Chinese students negotiate identity, relationality, and community membership through writing, the study expands theoretical conversations about writing as a socially mediated practice.

The implications for practice are significant. For UK universities, the findings point to the necessity of moving beyond remedial language-based support to more holistic, culturally responsive writing pedagogies. Effective support must address not only language development but also academic culture shock, disciplinary socialisation, and the relational dynamics embedded in writing practices. Institutions should develop writing support that acknowledges students' cultural backgrounds, validates their multilingual repertoires, and recognizes the social nature of academic writing.

For Chinese universities, the results highlight the need to strengthen academic English training and assessment before students study abroad. Preparing students with stronger academic literacy foundations can help mitigate the cultural and linguistic shock experienced in Western academic contexts.

Finally, for educators, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding Chinese students'

perspectives, identities, and learning histories. Teachers can use these insights to adopt more inclusive pedagogies, foster self-directed learning, and support international students in leveraging their cultural and linguistic strengths. This research, therefore, contributes not only to the literature on Chinese students' academic writing but also to broader discussions about equity, internationalization, and culturally sustaining writing instruction.

10.4 Limitations and suggestions for further research

The exploration of Chinese postgraduate students' academic English writing is far-reaching and complex, and this study can only touch on a small part of this research area. In view of this, the limitations of this study will be discussed and suggestions for future research will be made.

Firstly, as it is a mixed-method case study involving 30 Chinese students from the two departments of a university, the generalisability of the findings may be limited due to the small number of respondents. The study attempts to explore how students become participants in their communities of practice and how they use their various capitals to support their writing in the face of academic culture shock. Such an analysis may not be sufficient to fully understand and address the complex experiences of Chinese postgraduates in navigating academic writing across a range of disciplines. Thus, the differences in how Chinese students studying in different disciplines and of different genders navigate social relationships and academic writing can be further explored in later research. Secondly while the current study focuses on the academic writing difficulties of Chinese students studying in the UK, further research could be conducted with Chinese international students in other countries to provide a comprehensive picture of the difficulties they encounter in writing in different English-speaking countries.

Thirdly, while Chinese students' linguistic and rhetorical skills in English have been extensively researched in the existing literature, few studies focus on how navigating social relations affects the writing practices of Chinese postgraduate students. As a consequence, more research that explores these aspects would generate a better understanding of how to provide constructive assistance and writing feedback to students, based on their unique needs and help them improve their academic English writing skills. Finally, the current research has explored the difficulties

of academic writing from the perspective of Chinese students. Further research could involve the perspectives of teachers in the UK and China to investigate their understanding of the difficulties Chinese students face in academic writing and to understand the various perceptions of tutors and universities. This can better contribute to the reform of the English academic writing curriculum and teaching.

10.5 Personal reflections on my PhD journey

Conducting the current research has been a rewarding exercise for me, as it has developed my independent research skills and enabled me to gain much knowledge about writing in English. My PhD has made me understand social science research better and distinguish between different research paradigms and theories in educational research in order to select appropriate research methods for my own research. Apart from this, I have cultivated critical research skills such as research design, data collection, transcription and data analysis, and learned how to share and discuss my ideas with colleagues and supervisors. On a personal level, the PhD journey has developed my ability to learn and think critically and independently and allowed me to construct different arguments and identify different theoretical perspectives.

In addition, I had the opportunity to attend many courses and lectures offered by the university, where I broadened my horizons, learned the use of the software necessary for my research such as the literature management software Endnote and have become familiar with different areas of research, which has also served as a foundation for my research.

Despite this, as a novice researcher, I also faced some challenges during my PhD studies. For example, I struggled in deciding which research methods to use and determining the content of questionnaires or questions to discuss with students in the semi-structured interviews. Also, I had to deal with issues like anxiety, lack of confidence, and time management during the completion of the research, which was challenging. Despite these difficulties, there were also many positive moments that kept me motivated. Each issue that arose and was resolved helped me to understand my research more clearly and guided me to progress step by step with a skeptical and questioning attitude. Through the research design and data collection, I tried to

obtain rich and reliable data to answer my research questions. As a future educator who would like to become a teacher, this research has enabled me to gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' difficulties in writing English and an appreciation of the different standards of English writing in China and the UK. Exploring students' difficulties in academic English writing also made me aware of the shortcomings of the Chinese English language teaching model and the areas that need improvement. Conducting research in different areas to help Chinese students improve their academic English writing skills may be the direction and focus of my future research. May this study contribute to that collective fight, and to the ongoing struggle for more just and equitable academic futures. As Freire (1970) reminds us, education is always a political act - one that can either reproduce or challenge the status quo. By embracing a critical pedagogical stance, we can harness the transformative power of writing to create more liberatory and empowering possibilities for Chinese international students and for all those who dare to imagine and work towards a better world.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Background information of the participants

2018-2019 Interviews with students

items participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Degree	School
1 Wenyi Zhang	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
2 Xuehui Jia	25	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
3 Guilian Chen	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
4 Lina Jia	22	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
5 Lixiang Li	24	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
6 Yufan Hui	24	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
7 Yajing Wang	27	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
8 Weijiao Zhang	35	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
9 Yanan Li	32	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
10 Tianyuan Xu	25	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
11 Yushan Nie	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Education and Lifelong Learning
12 Zixin Chen	22	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
13 Shaoming Pan	24	Male	Postgraduate Taught	Business
14 Zhihao Zhang	27	Male	Postgraduate Taught	Business
15 Yaling Che	24	Male	Postgraduate Taught	Business
16 Zetong Li	22	Male	Postgraduate Taught	Business
17 Yawen Shen	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
18 Jiaqian Liu	25	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
19 Zijie Ning	24	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
20 Tianqi Li	22	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
21 Hongxin Sun	22	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business

22 Jinghan Yang	22	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
23 Boyang Zou	24	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business
24 Ruimeng Zhang	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	Business

2019-2020 Interviews with student and their Assignments

items participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Degree	Number of Assignment	School
1 Yuxin Bai	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	5	Education and Lifelong Learning
2 Ailin Zhang	23	Female	Postgraduate Taught	4	Education and Lifelong Learning
3 Xiaocao Wang	24	Female	Postgraduate Taught	4	Education and Lifelong Learning
4 Qing Zhai	26	Female	Postgraduate Taught	2	Business
5 Bohua Huang	23	Male	Postgraduate Taught	4	Business
6 Mingchao Wu	25	Male	Postgraduate Taught	3	Business

Appendix B Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form Sample (Interview)

Hongrui Zheng
Postgraduate Researcher
30 October 2018

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Academic Writing Challenges: Experiences of Chinese Postgraduate Taught Students in the UK

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT – Chinese Postgraduate Taught student

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about your experiences and challenges in academic writing of being a postgraduate student at UEA. I am interested in exploring your challenges and experiences in academic writing. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are currently enrolled in a postgraduate taught course at UEA. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher: Hongrui Zheng, a PhD researcher at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia.

(3) What will the study involve for me?

Your participation will involve having one semi-structured interview with me. The interview will take place in an empty classroom or elsewhere in the UEA at a time that is convenient to you and the interviews will be audio recorded. You will be asked questions relating to your experiences and challenges of academic writing. You will be able to review the transcript of your interviews, if you wish to ensure they are an accurate reflection of the discussion.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

It is expected that each interview will take between 30-40 mins.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia. If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind later, you are free to withdraw at any time. You can do this by letting me know by email (ckp17cwu@uea.ac.uk) or by phone (07763340599).

You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want me to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from the records and will not be included in any results, up to the point I have submitted the thesis.

(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Discussing issues relating to your study experience might bring up issues of concern. We are able to stop the interview at any time you feel uncomfortable and I will also have access to information about Student Support Services if you require them. And aside from giving up your time, I do not expect that there will be any costs associated with taking part in this study. You will be given a pseudonym and all your information will be anonymised.

(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

I would hope that by talking about your experiences that it will allow you to reflect on this area that have helped as well as this area that might need additional support. The study will also contribute to the effectiveness of provision for future students and tutors.

(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to me collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2015).

Your information will be stored securely and your identity/information will only be disclosed with your permission, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications unless you agree to this using the tick box on the consent form. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

(9) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, I will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact me on ckp17cwu@uea.ac.uk or 07763340599.

(10) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell me that you wish to receive feedback by providing a contact detail on the consent section of this information sheet. This feedback will be in the form of a one page lay summary of the findings. You will receive this feedback after the study is finished.

(11) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Hongrui Zheng,
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
ckp17cwu@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact Deputy Head Prof Terry Haydn or EDU REC Chair Dr. Kate Russell.

(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and give me before the interview. Please keep the information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.

- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.

- ✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

- ✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

- ✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

- ✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

- ✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

- ✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, but these publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES NO
- **Reviewing transcripts** YES NO
- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES NO

If you answered **YES**, please add your e-mail address (not your UEA one just in case you will graduate when my findings are available)

Email: _____

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (2nd Copy to Participant)

I, [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.

- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.

- ✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

- ✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

- ✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

- ✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

- ✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

- ✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, but these publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES NO
- **Reviewing transcripts** YES NO
- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES NO

If you answered **YES**, please add your e-mail address (not your UEA one just in case you will graduate when my findings are available)

Email: _____

Appendix C Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form Sample (Survey)

Hongrui Zheng
Postgraduate Researcher
30 October 2018

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Academic Writing Challenges: Experiences of Chinese Postgraduate Taught Students in the UK

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT – Chinese Postgraduate Taught student

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about your experiences and challenges in academic writing of being a postgraduate student at UEA. I am interested in exploring your challenges and experiences in academic writing. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are currently enrolled in a postgraduate taught course at UEA. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher: Hongrui Zheng, a PhD researcher at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia.

(3) What will the study involve for me?

You will be asked to complete an anonymous online survey that will ask you questions about your experiences and challenges of academic writing.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

It is expected that the survey will take between 10-15 minutes to complete.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to

participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia. If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time before you have submitted the questionnaire. Once you have submitted it, your responses cannot be withdrawn because they are anonymous and therefore we will not be able to tell which one is yours.

(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Discussing issues relating to your study experience might bring up issues of concern. We are able to stop to fill in the questionnaire at any time you feel uncomfortable and I will also have access to information about Student Support Services if you require them. And aside from giving up your time, I do not expect that there will be any costs associated with taking part in this study. You will be given a pseudonym and all your information will be anonymised.

(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

I would hope that by talking about your experiences that it will allow you to reflect on this area that have helped as well as this area that might need additional support. The study will also contribute to the effectiveness of provision for future students and tutors.

(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to me collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2015).

Your information will be stored securely and your identity/information will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

(9) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, I will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact me on ckp17cwu@uea.ac.uk or 07763340599.

(10) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell me that you wish to receive feedback by providing a contact detail on the consent section of this information sheet. This feedback will be in the form of a one page lay summary of the findings. You will receive this feedback after the study is finished.

(11) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East

Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Hongrui Zheng,

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

ckp17cwu@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact Deputy Head Prof Terry Haydn or EDU

REC Chair Dr. Kate Russell.

(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and give me before the interview. Please keep the information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- ✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- ✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- ✓ I understand that as I am completing an anonymous questionnaire once I have submitted the questionnaire I will not be able to withdraw my data.
- ✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- ✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, but these publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- **Completing a questionnaire** YES NO
- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES NO

If you answered **YES**, please add your e-mail address (not your UEA one just in case you will graduate when my findings are available)

Email: _____

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (2nd Copy to Participant)

I, [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- ✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- ✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- ✓ I understand that as I am completing an anonymous questionnaire once I have submitted the questionnaire I will not be able to withdraw my data.
- ✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- ✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, but these publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- **Completing a questionnaire** YES NO
- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES NO

If you answered **YES**, please add your e-mail address (not your UEA one just in case you will graduate when my findings are available)

Email: _____

Appendix D Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form Sample (Assignments)

Hongrui Zheng
Postgraduate Researcher
30 October 2018

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Academic Writing Challenges: Experiences of Chinese Postgraduate Taught Students in the UK

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT – Chinese Postgraduate Taught student

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about your experiences and challenges in academic writing of being a postgraduate student at UEA. I am interested in exploring your challenges and experiences in academic writing. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are currently enrolled in a postgraduate taught course at UEA. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher: Hongrui Zheng, a PhD researcher at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia. And this research is under Prof. Ken Hyland and Dr Ana Ines Salvi's guide.

(3) What will the study involve for me?

Your participation will involve having 2 semi-structured interviews with me. The interviews will take place in an empty classroom or elsewhere in the UEA at a time that is convenient to you and the interviews will be audio recorded. You will be asked questions relating to your experiences of academic writing. You will be able to review the transcript of your interviews, if you wish to ensure they are an accurate reflection of the discussion.

Your participation will involve show me your writing activities, all your writing drafts, assignments and final dissertations. Audio recording of meetings between the lecturer and you and lecturer's feedback for your writing drafts, assignments and final dissertations.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

It is expected that each interview will take between 30-60 mins. Artifacts collection will take you 60 mins.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia. If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind later, you are free to withdraw before 1st of June. You can do this by letting me know by email (ckp17cwu@uea.ac.uk) or by phone (07763340599).

You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want me to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from the records and will not be included in any results, and I will return all the textual artifacts to you, up to the point I have submitted the thesis.

(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Discussing issues relating to your study experience might bring up issues of concern. We are able to stop the interview at any time you feel uncomfortable and I will also have access to information about Student Support Services if you require them. And aside from giving up your time, I do not expect that there will be any costs associated with taking part in this study. You will be given a pseudonym and all your information will be anonymised.

(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

I would hope that by talking about your experiences that it will allow you to reflect on this area that have helped as well as this area that might need additional support. The study will also contribute to the effectiveness of provision for future students and tutors.

(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to me collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2018).

(9) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, I will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact me on ckp17cwu@uea.ac.uk or 07763340599.

(10) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell me that you wish to receive feedback by providing a contact detail on the consent section of this information sheet. This feedback will be in the form of a one page lay summary of the findings. You will receive this feedback after the study is finished.

(11) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Hongrui Zheng,

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

ckp17cwu@uea.ac.uk

You can also contact my supervisor Professor Ken Hyland (K.Hyland@uea.ac.uk) and Dr Ana Ines Salvi (A.Salvi@uea.ac.uk) via e-mail

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact the Head of School Prof Nalini Boodhoo (N.Boodhoo@uea.ac.uk) via e-mail.

(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and give me before the interview. Please keep the information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.

- ✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

- ✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- ✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

- ✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

- ✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- ✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, but these publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- | | | | | |
|--|-----|--------------------------|----|--------------------------|
| Audio-recording | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Artefacts | | | | |
| Drafts of assessment | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Final assessment | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Supervisory meetings minutes and audio recordings | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Lecturers' feedback on drafts and on the final assignment | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES NO

If you answered **YES**, please add your e-mail address (not your UEA one just in case you will graduate when my findings are available)

Email: _____

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (2nd Copy to Participant)

I, [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.

- ✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

- ✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- ✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

- ✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

- ✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- ✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, but these publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- | | | | | |
|--|-----|--------------------------|----|--------------------------|
| Audio-recording | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Artefacts | | | | |
| Drafts of assessment | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Final assessment | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Supervisory meetings minutes and audio recordings | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Lecturers' feedback on drafts and on the final assignment | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study? | | | | |
| | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input type="checkbox"/> |

If you answered **YES**, please add your e-mail address (not your UEA one just in case you will graduate when my findings are available)

Email: _____

Appendix E Survey

Questionnaire on Academic Writing Experiences of Chinese Postgraduate Taught Students at a UK university

Academic Writing Experiences of Chinese Postgraduate Taught Students at a UK university

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Chinese Postgraduate Taught students experience and overcome the challenges of academic writing in English universities. I would therefore be very grateful if you would take the time to complete the survey. In addition to the research survey, with your written permission, I would like to make an interview with you for the same study. I would definitely value your opinions and your identity and answers are absolutely confidential. Thank you for your time and cooperation.

Section I. Personal Basic Information

1. Your gender is:

A. Male

B. Female

2. Your age is:

A. 20-25 years old

B. 26-30 years old

C. Over 31 years old

3. Have you completed your undergraduate study in China:

A. Yes

B. No

4. Did you receive any special training on English academic writing before you studied as a postgraduate student in UK?

A. Yes

B. No

5. Did you take part in any training on English academic writing during your postgraduate study in UK?

A. Yes

B. No

Section 2:

6. How easy do you think English academic writing during your postgraduate study is:

A. It's very easy

B. It's easy

C. General

D. It's hard

E. It's very difficult

7. Do you often encounter difficulties in English academic writing during your postgraduate study:

A. Never had any difficulty

B. Very few difficulties

C. General

D. There are some difficulties

E. Every time I have difficulties

8. Are you familiar with English academic writing during your postgraduate study:

A. Very familiar

B. I'm familiar with it

C. General

D. I'm not familiar with it

E. Very unfamiliar

9. Are you familiar with the British criteria for papers during your postgraduate study:

A. Very familiar

B. I'm familiar with it

C. General

D. I'm not familiar with it

E. Very unfamiliar

Section 3:

10. Do you think the skills of reading and writing would challenge your English academic writing?

A. Very disagreeable

B. I don't agree

C. General

D. Quite agree

E. Very much agree

11. Do you think the skills of speaking and listening would challenge your English academic writing?

A. Very disagreeable

B. I don't agree

C. General

D. Quite agree

E. Very much agree

12. Do you think the difficulty in understanding key concepts taken for granted by your supervisors would contribute to English academic writing challenges for you?

A. Very disagreeable

B. I don't agree

C. General

D. Quite agree

E. Very much agree

13. Do you think critical analysis and problem-solving abilities would contribute to English academic writing challenges for you?

A. Very disagreeable

B. I don't agree

C. General

D. Quite agree

E. Very much agree

14. Do you think ethical issues, such as plagiarism, would contribute to English academic writing challenges for you?

A. Very disagreeable

B. I don't agree

C. General

D. Quite agree

E. Very much agree

15. Do you think prior weak academic achievement would contribute to English academic writing challenges for you?

A. Very disagreeable

B. I don't agree

C. General

D. Quite agree

E. Very much agree

16. Do you think websites and software have you used for academic writing would contribute to English academic writing challenges for you?

A. Very disagreeable

B. I don't agree

C. General

D. Quite agree

E. Very much agree

17. Do you think bibliography requirements would produce English academic writing challenges for you?

A. Very disagreeable

B. I don't agree

C. General

D. Quite agree

E. Very much agree

18. Do you think lecturer's feedback on your assignment would produce English academic writing challenges for you?

A. Very disagreeable

B. I don't agree

C. General

D. Quite agree

E. Very much agree

Section 4: Other Information

19. How do you overcome the challenges of English academic writing?

A. Get help from friends

B. Get help from families

C. Get help from tutors

D. Get help from classmates

E. Get help from online resources

20. Which is the most difficult aspect of academic writing for you? (Number from 1(least) to 7 (most))

A. Searching for databases and literature resources

B. Using literatures and resources

C. Vocabulary and sentence accuracy

D. Rhetorical organization/ Text structure

E. English academic writing conventions

F. Knowledge of subject content

G. Understanding assignment requirement

21. What else academic writing course would you need? Please check in the box. You can check more than one answer:

A. Searching for databases and literatures resources

B. Using literatures and resources

C. Vocabulary and sentence accuracy

D. Rhetorical organization/ Text structure

E. English academic writing conventions

F. How to understand assignment requirement

G. Understanding assignment requirement

Appendix F Interview guidelines

Interview Questions

Section I. Students' writing experiences before postgraduate study

1. What was your English writing experiences before your postgraduate study? What kind of writing training/support did you receive?
2. Do you find your prior writing experiences helpful to your current postgraduate course? If yes, any examples?

Section II. Students' writing experiences during the postgraduate study

3. What challenges did you experience in writing assignments for your MA courses? Top three examples?
4. What support have you got for your English academic writing? How do you find them useful?
5. Which website and softwares have you used for academic writing? Google Scholar, Wikipedia, UEA library, Pigai, Grammarly, Linggle, *etc.* (*did you mean for the purpose of literature review or sth else?* Why these websites and softwares?
6. How do you seek support for assignment writing from peers? Is that useful? If yes, in which way? If not, why?
7. Do you find talking to friends and families about your assignment writing helpful? If so, how has that benefited your assignment writing?
8. What strategies do you find useful in improving your English academic writing? (For example, make an outline or plan before writing, use a dictionary to check things I am not sure about when I write, edit my work when I have finished writing a draft (grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and structure))
9. What suggestions would you give to your Chinese peers on how to improve the quality of academic writing?
10. What else you would like to tell me about your academic writing?

Section III. Students' perceptions on teachers' feedback

11. What do you think of your lecturer's feedback on your assignment? Why? How could the feedback be more useful in your personal experiences?

12. According to lecturers' feedback, what do you think you need to develop in your English academic writing skills? And what do you find is most difficult to improve?
13. Do you discuss the feedback with peers or family members? If yes, can you tell me a bit more. Is this useful?
14. Did your lecturers give students opportunities to ask questions about the writing requirements in class and explain students' doubt to the whole class? If yes, is that useful? In which ways?
15. Did lecturers give you chance to discuss feedback with them on individual basis? If yes, how was your experience? If not, why?
16. What kind of support will you like to get if you make a wish list?
17. Anything else you would like to add?

Appendix G: Sample Interview Transcript

Researcher: What was your English writing experiences before your postgraduate study? What kind of writing training/support did you receive?

Participant: I have studied English major in China for 4 years as an undergraduate. The English classes were aimed at improving our English ability. For example, we had intensive reading class, extensive reading class, grammar class, writing class, essay writing class, these courses helped us lay a solid English foundation. When I came to the UK for the postgraduate program, I found that every course assessment requires writing. The four-year undergraduate program in China helped me build up and improve my language. In terms of writing a paper, we were required to write a paper with 5,000 words for undergraduate graduation, but it was very different from the present. The undergraduate paper did not emphasize critical thinking and literature citation. Therefore, I did not fully understand these aspects at that time. When I came to the UK and I learned that every course requires students to write a paper for the evaluation, that is, the final exam of each of my courses is to write a paper, this is not the same as our country where we have a lot of exams.

Before coming to the UK to study, I took the IELTS test. When I prepared for IELTS, I had to prepare a chart analysis and argument writing. At that time, I read many books and learned many skills related. But IELTS is exam-oriented, for example, we had a short writing and a long writing in the test. We received a lot of training before taking the test and formed some thinking about how to conduct such standardized writing. I think that all of those have laid a solid foundation for me to study here, then I have preparation and understanding of what is thesis writing.

Researcher: Do you find your prior writing experiences helpful to your current postgraduate course? If yes, any examples?

Participant: They were very helpful. But when I came here, I also felt that there are some differences. Experiencing a new assessment method is quite new to me. The lecturer in each course emphasized critical thinking, which came as a shock. Each of our courses will have a module guide that lists how you will be evaluated in the course. There will be a lot of judgment criteria, for example, a course may require us to choose a related topic, express our opinions through connecting and using literature. I found that many of the assessment standards mentioned critical thinking which didn't come to me no matter in my college writing class or in the IELTS, but when I came here, I found that critical thinking becomes a very important assessment for academic writing.

Although I will also think about what I read while studying in China, it differs from the critical thinking emphasized by British tutors. I now realise that only by thinking critically about the different views I read can I clearly write a logical assignment that accords with my own views. Chinese "indirect" writing style comes from the classical essay format used in Chinese imperial examinations, called ba-gu-wen (eight-legged

essay). Although this kind of literary style was abolished so many years ago, it still influences some students' writing styles. The part-for-part structure in English essays written by Chinese students is similar to the ba-gu-wen structure. Ba-gu-wen stipulates a strict writing style while the writing structure in Western countries gives students more opportunities to do critical writing.

Researcher: In addition to the critical thinking you mentioned, What challenges did you experience in writing assignments for your postgraduate course?

Participant: In addition to critical thinking, I think the difficulty is that I don't know how to cite literature. Although when I was in college, I had done a lot of paraphrase training, the lecturers here often emphasize the issue of plagiarism. There will always be worries when citing literature. I'm not sure if my paraphrase is correct and I am hesitant about where I should cite directly and where I should cite indirectly, so I am afraid that if I cited wrong, I would have the problem of plagiarism.

Secondly, because I majored in English, I don't think there is any difficulty in grammar. I may read faster than others, my English is fine. By writing the first paper, I basically understood the requirements of writing. However, although I'm more confident in grammar, my writing couldn't be as clear and professional as that in the literature, I think I'm still not good enough in expression. Sometimes I feel like I can't fully express my opinions when I write something.

Researcher: What support have you got for your English academic writing? How do you find them useful?

Participant: I have participated in the In-Session Course, and I think it works. For example, a lecturer taught us how to paraphrase in one class, but the class went too fast and the lecturer also spoke English fast. I didn't fully understand it. But in that class, we did some paraphrasing training, which reminded me of the related training in China.

Researcher: Which website and software have you used for academic writing? Just like google scholar, Wikipedia, UEA library, Pigai, Grammarly, Linggle, etc. Why these websites and software?

Participant: When I wrote a paper, I will use Google Scholar or the website of the school library to check the literature. Also, our lecturer will recommend some books, and I usually borrow the books from the library. Sometimes the lecturer will mention the names of some authors. I will use Google Scholar to search for the authors' related articles. I think it's easier for me to read articles than to read books because through reading the summary, introduction, and conclusion of a journal article, I can directly figure out whether this article is related to what I did. Reading books takes a lot of time and I may not be able to catch the points, so generally, I will read and cite the journal articles.

When reading literature, sometimes I will use Google Translation, or check the words that I didn't know. I will use these software to help my reading. I think reading is also an obstacle. The lecturer will give us a reading list and emphasize critical thinking. This is not like we did in China, I remember that when I wrote papers in China, I just needed to cite one or two references. However, the lecturers here often emphasize critical thinking, so I have to pay attention to the use of the reference every time I submit my homework, and the more, the better. Therefore, I must read a lot, and those websites can help me improve my efficiency.

Through the school's library and Google Scholar, I was able to find various references for free, just like CNKI used in China, but here, we have more resources than CNKI. I can find resources from all over the world. These sufficient resources are important for me in academic writing.

I didn't use the software Grammarly, because as I mentioned, grammar is not a problem for me, so I didn't consider it.

Researcher: When writing an assignment, will your classmates discuss and communicate with each other, for example, through a WeChat group? Will you discuss it in it? And how do you seek support for assignment writing from peers? Is that useful? If yes, in which way? If not, why?

Participant: Yes, we will discuss it. It is mainly about assessment criteria but not about how to write it. First of all, sometimes two or three of us will discuss how to meet the requirements. For example, for critical thinking, we will discuss what content is considered as critical thinking and what is not. Another example is that, I know I need to cite a lot of literature, but I don't know what kind of citation is valid.

Secondly, we will also discuss how to choose a topic. The lecturer will generally give us a very wide range. He will let us write a paper for this course instead of giving us a specific topic. Then I will discuss it with my classmates.

We will also discuss the content of the writing. For example, some papers need to be combined with our own experiences and theories we learned in class. I will discuss it with my classmates about my own experience and which theory is more suitable. We discussed a lot at this point.

Also, if I didn't get a point that the lecturer said during the class or I didn't hear it clearly, I would ask the students whose English are good, especially those native English speakers, and they would love to tell me about it.

But when a classmate gives a presentation and asks us to advice on his outline, I am often afraid to say what I think. And if a classmate asks me to read his assignment before submitting it to the supervisor, and help check grammar and vocabulary, it makes me feel stressed because I'm worried that I'm making worthless or even wrong advice.

Researcher: In addition to discussing with your classmates, do you find talking to friends and families about your assignment writing helpful? If so, how has that benefited your assignment writing?

Participant: Generally, I don't discuss my study with my family and most of my friends are not in the same major, so we communicate less. I have a classmate who is studying a postgraduate program in another school. We often discuss with each other, but the topics we discussed are the same as I talked with my classmates. We will also talk about how our schools take classes, what literature we read, what kind of writing requirements we have, etc.

Researcher: What strategies do you find useful in improving your English academic writing? (for example, make an outline or plan before writing, use dictionary to check things I am not sure, edit my work when I finished writing a draft)

Participant: I think it is more useful to discuss the topic selection and the outline with the tutors. Comparing tutors from Chinese universities with those from UK universities, I found that they play different roles in guiding students' writing. Most Chinese tutors tell students what they are supposed to do directly, whereas those in UK universities allow students to think and solve problems by themselves.

The lecturers at our school always arrange the tutorial to give students suggestions on the outline or draft of the assignment before we formally submit the assignment, so that I can have the opportunity to revise it before the formal submission. However, as the tutor's tutorial is usually arranged after the thesis outline or draft is submitted, I will make an appointment for one-to-one guidance from the student services team when I need any help. Although these tutors do not know my major as well as the school lecturers or professors, through communication with them, I can have a better understanding of the assignment requirements and learn a lot of skills about academic writing.

The lecturer can help me to sort out a lot of things, like what is the general direction of this course, I think it is helpful to me, at least I won't go off the topic. But he will not give me specific instructions, because we don't discuss it in detail. It's just about how I can make a specific discussion framework or whether I could write some experience when I was in China? We discussed more directly and it's a general discussion. It's kind of like a private conversation, like how would I use the literature, what theories should I use, or could I say it in that way?

Researcher: What else you would like to tell me about your academic writing?

Participant: It was not long since I came here, and it takes a long time to get familiar with the writing here, so I think it would be better if there is more training in writing. Like the reading speed I just mentioned, the understanding of critical thinking and the assessment standards, I think it will take a certain amount of time to figure it out. We will submit an assignment for each course, and then we get scores and feedback, but

unfortunately, there's no further follow-up after the feedback. I think that if I want to continue my Ph.D. study here or work in a field that requires English academic writing, then the current academic writing training is not enough.

I think we can organize a writing group in which everyone can write papers together. Of course, it would be better if the lecturer is also involved in the class to guide the students. If we have some writing training like this, I believe it would be quite helpful. The In session courses provided by the school are too general. It is not a unique training for our subject, especially when it comes to how to use the literature and how to proceed with an argument, we didn't have particularly learning in these aspects. Therefore, it would be better if we can have a class to discuss our writing and the lecturer tells us about the mistakes that students often make and explains what is deemed as critical thinking and what is not; what kind of citation is better, which are more common; what is a correct paraphrase and what kind of paraphrase will cause plagiarism instead of just telling us the standard without giving examples. When we learned about some obvious mistakes, we will avoid them, which is very helpful for improvement.

Researcher: Did your lecturers give students opportunities to ask questions about the writing requirements in class and explain students' doubts to the whole class? If yes, is that useful? In which ways?

Participant: The lecturer will ask us if there are any questions, but I think we didn't prepare well for the on-the-spot questions, so sometimes the questions we asked are not accurate, and I am afraid to ask in case of making mistakes. Generally, it will not take up a lot of time in the classroom. Sometimes the lecturer will ask something like if we have begun to write. It feels like to ask "How are you", and everyone does not want to take up too much class time. So I think the best way is to have a specific time, such as organizing a writing group that I mentioned before to provide guidance and solve practical problems.

Researcher: What do you think of your lecturer's feedback on your assignment? Why? How could the feedback be more useful in your personal experiences?

Participant: Lecturers usually gave very general feedback which is pertinent and will let us know the problems of our writing. Through my lecturers' feedback, I realized that I had repeated too many points expressed in the assignments in the summary section, which reducing the space for my own comments in it. Which makes my assignment is imbalanced in that it is more descriptive than critical.

The feedback will be surely helpful for my next writing, but when I wrote the next time, I might already forget it, or the new paper may be a completely different one. The problems pointed out in the past feedback may not be used in the current context. I think that some feedback did not point out which part of my paper is not good enough. The lecturer may only say that you lack critical thinking and your citation is inaccurate. Thus, I know how many points I got but I still don't know how I should improve. I think

if we were asked to submit a 1000-word writing during the course and expose our problems in paraphrase, quotation, critical thinking while the lecturer gives feedback, then we will make improvements when submitting the final paper. This would be better because we would already know where we should make some improvement rather than submitting the paper, get grades and feedback but not revise the paper any further.

Researcher: So when you get the feedback from your lecturers, do you think I got the score and the feedback, so this article is finished, or do you think that getting the feedback to analyze and to reflect is a learning process, it will allow me to learn a lot of things and will still be helpful when I write the next?

Participant: I learned something more or less because the lecturer will point out if a citation is not appropriate, critical thinking is not enough in a place, the overall idea is good or not, etc. all of which provides me some ideas. But like I said, I may change another topic next time. I know that I may not cite enough, my critical thinking is not good, and my writing is not clear enough, but they didn't tell me how I could improve in those aspects, so I move to the next article, I still do not know how, because I did not get a training to improve it. Feedback from a lecturer would surely influence me because I am a learner and I will think over the feedback. If the lecturer said that the citations were not enough in a place, then I will add more next time; if he said that I am not critical thinking enough, maybe I will figure it out by writing more papers. I will think of it and figure it out by myself.

Researcher: Did your lecturers give you a chance to discuss feedback with them on an individual basis? If yes, how were your experiences? If not, why?

Participant: The lecturers will give the opportunity, but I am not very likely to go to them. I will see if I pass the score first. If I pass it, I will not go to the lecturer to discuss it. First of all, I think the feedback given by the lecturer is unimpeachable and they all make sense. The second is that I will not write the same topic in this course. I will look at the feedback to see where the problem is, so it is not necessary to ask the lecturer. However, I remember that there was a tutorial in which the lecturer and I talked about each point of deduction in the paper, it helped me a lot. I think as long as I pass it then I'll let it go, after all, I will not use it in future work, so I won't ask.

Researcher: Do you discuss the feedback with peers or family members? If yes, can you tell me a bit more? Is this useful?

Participant: There's barely any discussion between our classmates. We might ask each other whether we passed it, the scores, etc., but will not discuss feedback. I'm not used to showing my papers and lecturers' feedback to others. I think this is a privacy and I don't want others to know what I wrote. So I will not take out a paragraph, a specific section, or the theory I used to discuss with my classmates. But if there was someone who didn't pass it, we might help him to figure out what the problem was and would suggest that he go to find the lecturer.

Researcher: According to the feedback given by the lecturer, what do you think is the most difficult to improve?

Participant: First of all, I think it is the ideas, such as if I read a good article and I want to write that way, I may be restricted by language, it is not all about the language, but the language is part of it. Sometimes I think my sentence structures are too simple. Sometimes I have no idea in writing, not just in English but also when I write in Chinese. Good ideas require some training and reading more literature. I think academic writing is a bit like you are going to tell a story. You have to combine what you have learned with your own experience, understand the topic, and need to think independently and come up with good ideas. This is very difficult, besides I have to use English, it is more difficult.

Researcher: What kind of support will you like to get if you make a wish list?

Participant: In addition to the writing group I mentioned before, we can set up a class to answer students' questions, talk about the mistakes that students often make, and analyze the excellent papers of the previous students.

Secondly, I think it would be better if a lecturer understands our situation in advance and knows how we wrote in China. If he knows that we didn't have any training in this area, he may give us more training opportunities. In fact, it's not that we don't know critical thinking. I think we do. For example, I've gone through a few courses so far. I think I know what critical thinking is and I'm making progress step by step. However, after we know and master it, the postgraduate study will be almost over. Therefore, I think more training should be done at an early stage. For example, the lecturers in China would let us write something after every one or two classes. We students will conduct peer assessment and the lecturer would evaluate our work. After going through some writing exercises before the final paper, we would be more familiar with how to complete the paper of a course.

Researcher: Some students have participated in the Pre-session course. Do you think the students who took a language class may be accustomed to the environment faster than you?

Participant: They told me they will learn how to cite literature in the language class and how to think critically. I think those theories are easy to understand and can be mastered quickly through attending the In session course, but it still needs practice. They will know how to write a paper in the language class, but we can also master it after we write it once.