

Teaching Academic Writing through a Process-Genre Approach: A Pedagogical Exploration of an EAP Program in China

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Abstract

This paper explores a process-genre approach to teaching academic writing skills to advanced English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students. The ‘reading-to-writing’ tasks and procedures were designed to examine the feasibility of the approach for a doctoral English-for-academic-purposes (EAP) program in the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 academic years. Data for this action research were drawn from a collection of students’ written tasks with peer-feedback and revisions spelled out, on-site researcher’s observation notes, and two rounds of interviews with two selected groups of students. The results indicate that the participants benefited significantly through reading and analyzing peer-reviewed journal articles and getting familiar with the peer-review criteria for assessing academic texts. The approach stimulated the participants’ interest in employing process writing skills and helped them understand the genre of disciplinary-specific academic writing. Issues with and implications for EAP learning and teaching in the Chinese context are discussed.

Keywords: academic writing, EAP, process-genre, disciplinary-specific, critical thinking, peer-feedback, genre awareness

Introduction

The rising bar of granting a graduate degree in China’s high-ranking universities has posed challenges for graduate students and their English instructors. While it is not common practice of all universities, top-tier ones require that students publish their work in peer-reviewed English journals before they are qualified for their master’s or PhD degree. The on-going discussions on second language (L2) students’ critical thinking skills and cultural differences, as well as instructional practices and teaching materials all need to be scrutinized with fresh eyes in lieu of

the new publication requirements and the new context of teaching English for internationalization of higher education and global knowledge mobilization.

This paper will first examine literature in two areas closely related to the current English for academic purposes (EAP) teaching in China: critical thinking skills and teaching approaches to writing. Their relevance to our study will be established. Then, we will introduce our two-year study exploring a process-genre approach to teaching academic writing skills to students in the doctoral EAP program at a top-tier Chinese university. This experimental research pinpoints the concerns of graduate students in writing academic English texts and recommends effective teaching practices using ‘reading-to-writing’ tasks and simulating the ‘reject or accept’ criteria for reviewing academic journal articles. We will demonstrate how the approach stimulated the participants’ interest in employing process writing skills and helped them understand the genre of disciplinary-specific academic writing in the Chinese context. Our findings may be applicable to other academic writing programs worldwide.

Literature Review

On-Going Discussions of Critical Thinking in Second Language Writing

Critical thinking is considered a necessary component of academic writing in the western tertiary context (Woodward-Kron, 2002). Extensive studies on critical thinking pedagogies suggest that L2 students have difficulties demonstrating their critical thinking abilities in argumentative writing assignments (Atkinson, 1997; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Chan, Ho, & Ku, 2011; Durkin, 2008; Floyd, 2011; Fox, 1994; Stapleton, 2001; Tian & Low, 2011; Wong, 2007). While some studies attribute L2 students’ problems in academic writing to cultural differences (Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995; Chan, Ho, & Ku, 2011; Durkin, 2008; Zamel, 1997), others see them from a pedagogical perspective, namely, whether and how critical thinking pedagogies should be adopted in the L2 writing classroom (e.g., Li, 2011; Lo, 2010; Pally, 2001; Mok, 2009; Stapleton, 2002; Tian & Low, 2011; Wong, 2007).

Researchers relate critical thinking to the Western social practice that tacitly incorporates an ideology of individualism which L2 learners may have serious trouble accessing (Atkinson, 1997; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). Along this line of the inquiry is the work on the framework of critical thinking pedagogies (Benesch, 2001; Pally, 2001). Benesch (2001) outlined how critical pragmatism might work in EAP writing: “the pragmatic goal of preparing students for the demands of academic courses in EAP can be balanced with the critical goals of situating the pedagogy in the students’ social context and encouraging them to question the status quo” (p. 167). Through her empirical research, Pally (2001) explored the most important components of academic writing pertaining to critical thinking skills which involve a series of developmental processes, such as: (a) grasping, understanding, and synthesizing claims or support from a range of sources; and (b) noting the social, economic and political contexts of claims and support, questioning or challenging them, formulating and presenting ideas (positions) of their own. Pally concluded that since the critical thinking skills “do not develop automatically in language classes” (p. 288), even advanced-level students with rich writing experience in first language (L1) and several years of English-as-a-foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) training demonstrated needs for explicit instruction in argumentation writing across disciplines, and there existed a gap between the critical thinking skills in EAP programs and those needed in academic/professional settings.

Some further attempts to promote critical pedagogy in different EFL/ESL classes have been made by scholars such as Kasper (2002), Moghaddam and Malekzadeh (2011), Rafi (2009), Stapleton (2002), and Tian and Low (2011). Their studies indicated that some conclusive stances on ESL critical thinking pedagogies may have oversimplified the whole issue of L2 students' critical thinking ability development, and further explorations are needed on how L2 writers overcome various obstacles and adjust themselves successfully to the new audiences using critical thinking skills in their academic texts. Wong (2007) called for special arrangement to be considered in curriculum design and effective assessment method to be employed to test students' learning. In the current Chinese context, it is urgent that researchers explore (1) how advanced EFL students can succeed in acquiring the critical thinking skills in line with the Western academic writing conventions, and (2) how writing instructional approaches can facilitate students' learning to publish their work on peer-reviewed disciplinary journals.

Second Language Writing Instruction and Process-Genre Approach

Second language (L2) writing instructional practices have gone through various phases from product-focused to process-focused approaches since the 1980s. The findings point to the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches employed in practice. The product approaches, as Pincas (1982) outlined, see writing as being primarily about linguistic knowledge, with attention focused on the appropriate use of vocabulary, grammar, and cohesive devices. On the other hand, the process approaches emphasize that students be instructed to move through the generation of ideas, collection of data, organization and revision, and finally to a finished text. The focus is on the natural development of linguistic skills and students' ongoing progress toward the final texts. However, process approaches, as Tribble (1996) pointed out, may lead to ignoring writers' differences while following the fixed sets of procedures, and giving insufficient importance to the purpose and social context of the piece being written.

Following the shift from product to process-oriented approaches, the genre-based approaches to teaching reading and writing came under the spotlight (Hyland, 2003; Williams & Colomb, 1993). Although genre-based pedagogies vary greatly (Hyon, 1996), the typical genre approaches regard writing as both linguistic (which is similar to product approaches) and social context-based (which stresses communicative purpose). Strengths of genre approaches have further been identified in various studies, including building L2 learners' genre awareness by instructing learners to reflect on the purpose and context of their writing, facilitating learners' text processing and production in the process of conscious learning through imitation and analysis of authentic texts, such as refereed journal articles (e.g., Cheng, 2006, 2008; Hyon, 2002; Johns, 1997).

The genre approach, however, has also been criticized because it undervalues the processes needed to produce a text and sees learners as largely passive (Badger & White, 2000). A new model for writing instruction advocated by Badger and White (2000) has been gaining popularity, the process-genre approach, a synthesis of the strengths of the three approaches. With the process-genre approach, writing instruction involves providing (1) knowledge about language (by offering learners input as in product approaches); (2) knowledge of the context (in particular the purpose of writing as in genre approaches); (3) skills in using language (by drawing on learners' potentials as in process approaches).

The process-genre approach aims to familiarize L2 learners with the essentials of writing, including form and content, ideas and organization, syntax and meaning, writing and revising, as suggested

by Raimes (1983). However, since direct guidance of genre knowledge demands that tasks be closely related to learners' real academic requirements in order to motivate and prepare writers to write for a real audience, it remains unknown what kind of assessment standards work effectively in an academic context. The variation of real writing tasks in different academic contexts could complicate the instructional practice with an overburden of both genre analysis and text drafting. Further, there is little empirical evidence on the effectiveness of relying on exemplars given by language teachers to L2 learners in the writing process (Hyon, 2002). In this paper, we explore the feasibility of the process-genre approaches in an EAP program, attempting to answer the question: In what ways would the process-genre approach work for the advanced learners in a Chinese EFL context?

Research Methodology

Context of Research

The EAP course for the doctoral programs in the Chinese university where the study was conducted lasted eight weeks in the fall semester of the program, with six hours of instruction per week, totaling 48 instructional hours. The university, like many other universities in China, set up the goal to promote international academic communication and enter the list of top 100 world-class universities. The campaign-slogan-fashioned catch phrase is *Double creation: Creating a world-class university; creating the world's top disciplines* (双创：创世界一流大学，创世界顶级学科). To go along with this pursuit, the curriculum of the PhD English education has been taken to task since 2006. To be specific, English academic writing was implemented as a credit bearing course across all disciplines including the arts, engineering, and science. The course was comprised of both extensive academic reading and writing, and intensive reading and writing with a goal to help students publish in English. In addition to the successful completion of their doctoral dissertation written in Chinese, all PhD candidates in this university were required to publish at least one paper in peer-reviewed journals indexed in SCI (Science Citation Index) or SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) before they could be granted their doctoral degree.

The on-site researcher was assigned to design the course in fall 2006 and has been coordinating the instruction. The objectives of the course were to help students:

1. develop a critical understanding of genres and conventions of academic writing, and raise awareness of and practice skills in critical reading, skill in searching and assessing various research materials and sources;
2. acquire the ability to use the discourse patterns of academic English and develop competence in structuring papers effectively, including skills in formulating an effective thesis, writing an effective introduction and conclusion, developing forceful arguments and producing coherent paragraphs;
3. improve competence in conveying a professional tone, and learn to use techniques for incorporating quotations and sources, including using the first person appropriately and in using parallel structure, active voice, and other techniques to write with clarity, precision and concision;

4. become familiar with and compose discipline-specific academic papers, including summaries, abstracts, proposals, applications and recommendations, reports and research papers;
5. develop competence in using formats of in-text documentation and final bibliography, including APA (American Psychological Association) format and MLA (Modern Language Association) format.

Action Research Design

In lieu of the goal of the research and the role of the researcher, we designed an action research process that was based on ongoing reflection. The process featured not only observation, data collection, and interpretation, but also planning and implementing changes, and the “practitioner’s personal theory” (Wells, 1994, p. 27), which would inform and be informed by the action research cycles. Mills (2014) maintained that,

The reality of classroom life is that teachers are constantly confronted with practical and critical challenges, and it is up to the individual action researchers to seek out approaches that provide both practical solutions and empowerment to address the critical social and cultural issues of classrooms today. (p. 17)

Action research “uses continuous cycles of investigation designed to reveal effective solutions to issues and problems experienced in specific situations and localized settings” (Stringer, 2014, p. 1). In our localized setting, we aimed to develop a more efficient approach to teaching English academic writing to graduate students in the Chinese context through systematic observations and ongoing data collection in reflection, decision-making and the development of more effective teaching strategies from the perspective of the practitioner- researcher (Parsons & Brown, 2002). This research method provided a framework that guided us toward a better understanding of when and how these graduate students could become better learners and academic writers.

Author Xu was one of the instructors teaching the EAP course in this Chinese university. Being an “insider” and working onsite with the students, he was able to observe the dynamics of students’ learning and interaction. He took observation notes, responded to students’ questions, and implemented the designed tasks and changes made. Author Li had taught in China for ten years and holds a faculty position at a Canadian university specializing in additional language writing research. Our shared interest in teaching and research, our close work with graduate students, and our professional positions gave us the opportunity to conduct action research exploring the complex dynamics involved in this EAP program. We maintained regular contact on the internet and by phone so our views reflected both the insider’s reflection and the outsider’s analysis.

We were aware of the challenges and advantages of conducting action research in the classroom. Although we identified the need to carry out the study, we did not put that need above our “responsibility to maintain the well-being of the study participants” (Mills, 2014, p. 35). All data collection activities were built upon the trust between the researcher and the participants. Since the purpose of the study was to help students finding a better way of learning and improving their academic writing competencies, the participants were passionate about the study. They were not passive subjects of the study, but rather, part of the active change agents empowered by the study process and the study findings. This positive collaboration between the researcher and students

allowed the researcher to monitor what was going on in the classroom constantly, develop a plan for action, implement the plan and reflect on whether the research made a difference in students' learning (Creswell, 2015). The adjustments made in the second year was the result of such reflexivity.

Data Collection Procedures

The study engaged two classes of PhD candidates in Sociology registered in the EAP program in 2010 (53 students) and 2011 (57 students) and their supervisors. Data were drawn from multiple sources to achieve triangulation: 1) a collection of students' writing; 2) feedback from the students' supervisors; 3) the EAP instructor's feedback and field notes; and 4) two rounds of interviews with eight students. The collection of the four groups of data was ongoing and interwoven. For example, the first interview took place at the beginning, field notes were taken throughout, and student writing and instructor and supervisor feedback were gathered as they were produced.

The researchers collected all four pieces of writing that the students produced in the course: an individual reflective commentary, a group commentary, an in-class report, and a simulated research proposal. The supervisor played a supporting role by offering feedback on the content of the participant's research proposal. The instructor offered feedback on all four pieces and took observational and reflective notes of the classroom and online forum activities. The instructor also used the 'accept or reject' model in grading—a simplified version of the accept-revise & resubmit-reject model commonly used in academic journal reviewing process. "Accept" means the draft could be accepted as was or with minor revision. "Reject" means the draft needed major revision and resubmission, and therefore was rejected this time. The acceptance or rejection was determined by: 1) generic criteria (based on the samples introduced in class; e.g., commentary writing should consist of own view and support); 2) linguistic criteria (evaluated by the instructor who had expertise in academic writing); and 3) argumentative criteria (evaluated by the supervisor who was able to identify the research gaps in the field and the value of the student's proposed research).

To design the language awareness activities as preparation for learning the contextual and linguistic knowledge related to genre analysis, the researchers chose the subject matters in accordance with the university's curriculum for English for Academic Purposes (EAP), targeting advanced EFL Chinese learners' linguistic and critical thinking development issues (c.f., Moghaddam & Malekzadeh, 2011; Rafi, 2009).

In the duration of the doctoral EAP courses, the researchers developed a set of discussion questions addressing issues from linguistic, generic and argumentative aspects, each with ten questions respectively (see [appendix](#)). These questions served as guidelines for the students' writing and the instructor's assessment of all the tasks required in the course. The EAP course was scheduled in four stages as follows.

In stage one, students were asked to select at least two journal articles each, according to their research interests, as course reading materials. This was similar to Cheng's (2008) study in which the students were instructed to each collect five published research articles from refereed journals in their fields as samples for subsequent genre analysis tasks (Cheng, 2008, p. 53). We required that the selected articles should be (a) original research articles; (b) published within ten years; (c) written by renowned scholars in the topic area; (d) from top-ranking peer-reviewed journals indexed by SSCI or SCI. At this stage, learning strategies such as identifying research articles, consulting

supervisors, referring to the journals' 'Notes to the contributors', and checking out the data base of the Institute for Science Information (ISI) were introduced.

In stage two, students worked in groups of two, three, or four, based on their reading and research interests. All the groups were required to set up an English-only online discussion forum on one of the two most popular networking websites in China—QQ of TenCent and MSN of Microsoft. These forums also served as a place for students to submit their written assignments in the subsequent stages. The instructor was invited as a guest to all the groups on a weekly basis.

In this stage, all the students submitted their reflective commentaries online while the instructor presented the analysis of some sample commentaries in the subsequent class. Group members were required to review one another's drafts. The instructor would only accept the commentaries that addressed all three aspects of reflections: linguistic, generic and argumentative, which were listed in the 30 guideline questions provided. Redrafting and resubmitting were required for all the rejected pieces.

Stage three consisted of group discussions after class, either online or face-to-face, based on students' readings. The instructor's feedback was presented in class. Viewing of video clips on the samples of expert writing downloaded from instructional websites was one of the teaching strategies used. Other strategies such as conferencing and round table discussions were also introduced. The writing tasks in this stage included a group commentary with a focus on the argumentation development and an in-class report on the linguistic and generic features of the papers they had read. The two writing tasks were assessed according to the structure of 'claim and support', a defining feature of the critical thinking skills in argumentation outlined by Pally (2001).

In stage four, the students were required to write a simulated research proposal for the application to a PhD program in an English-speaking university. Although the participants were already in doctoral programs, their academic work was completed in Chinese prior to this course. This task was to familiarize them with the English academic writing conventions through a manageable-sized piece. The process writing skills, such as brainstorming, planning, drafting, and proofreading, were introduced along with sample analysis of some successful PhD applicants' proposals. Proofreading among group members was used as a strategy for better quality. The proposals were assessed jointly by the EAP course instructor and the student's supervisor, with emphases on format and content respectively.

To identify the problems and difficulties in the stages of task completion in more depth, the researchers randomly selected eight students for two rounds of interviews. Four students from each class were placed in one group so the data from the two groups were comparable. The interviews were conducted at two different times and in different formats. At the beginning of the class, students were given the course outline and were asked to discuss what their perceived difficulties would be in this course based on what they had learned about the course requirements and tasks. The selected group of four students was interviewed at this time for their particular views. The second interview took place after the course was completed and assessment results submitted. The group of students were interviewed online and were asked to discuss what their major difficulties had been during the course.

Such a design promoted the students' sense of collective ownership of data and enhanced their awareness of their own learning and progress. It also allowed the researchers to assess

implementation of earlier actions for the betterment of later actions, that is, to feed the findings from the previous year to the instructional design for the second year so the feasibility and efficiency of the process-genre approach in question could be verified and improved through instructional practice.

Data Analysis Methods

We adopted an inductive approach in analyzing data. More specifically, constant comparison was used in coding and analyzing questionnaire results, observation notes, and interview transcripts as they were collected, looking for recurrent themes. The writing tasks of the students were analyzed by way of discourse analysis, following the guidelines provided in the [appendix](#). Surface-level language errors were not the major concern. Instead, the generic, academic, and argumentative features of the participants' writing, and peer/professor feedback were the primary foci. Constant comparison was also made across the two years' worth of data to examine if changes and improvements were occurring.

Data analysis processes interwove with data collection. The analyses took on a cyclical feature. For example, major themes from the initial 2009-2010 questionnaire informed the in-class activities and tasks implemented in the duration of the program. On-site observations and students' spontaneous responses were recorded as notes and analyzed by relating major themes with the themes from the questionnaire data. Insights gained from these earlier analyses were integrated in the on-going discussions and assignments completion processes. The student supervisor's feedback on content was used as complementary data to gate-keep the originality and quality of the student's writing. The supervisor's expertise in the research area prevented the student from taking short-cuts in reading original research articles in order to gain deep understanding of the material.

In the following, we present our findings from the study. In this action research project, what came out of the first year informed our design of the activities, tasks, and instruction in the second year. We will also elaborate on the on-going instructional improvement.

Findings and Analysis

Perceived and Practical Difficulties in Reading-to-Writing Process

The tasks for this action research project followed a reading-to-writing procedure. That is, students were required to familiarize the content by reading before they proceeded with any writing tasks. For example, in stages one and two, each group member was required to read two articles on different topics and offer commentary to be used in their group writing tasks. The writing task was similar to a review of research topics in their field.

At the beginning of the EAP course, the participants anticipated that their primary difficulty would lie in the reading tasks. One student said:

I have never had any experience choosing my own reading articles!... I have never read English journal articles before. I took a course English-for-Technology in my undergrad, but it was assigned textbook, all short newspaper articles, like reading comprehension test articles, nothing of frontier academic knowledge.

Other students shared similar learning experiences. As a result, they had great concerns about reading full-length English journal articles. The data from the 2010 interviews, in particular, indicated that understanding the English technical terms in the student's field of research was a difficult point. However, after they finished all the writing tasks for this course, they found that the most difficult part was writing, to be exact, writing academically and thinking in English. Such contrasted views were evident in the two interviews with regard to their difficulties in the course in both years 2010 and 2011. Table 1 below is an example of the 2011 interview results with the four sociology students.

Table 1. Major Difficulties Reported by the 2011 EAP Participants

Before the EAP class	After the EAP class
1. to thoroughly understand the papers' contents	1. to write an effective argument
2. to assess main claims from the different papers read by group members	2. to avoid translation from L1 to L2 while writing
3. to follow the acceptable formats of academic writing	3. to do proofreading
4. to identify further research topics	4. to follow the draft submission timeline

The participants' challenges in writing is largely attributive to the fact that students in the PhD programs completed their master's degrees in the Chinese language. Although they had to pass the CET-6 and demonstrate their English writing skills, most of their subject knowledge was acquired in classrooms where Chinese was the language of instruction and from books written in Chinese. As a result, the students were challenged in transferring and translating their knowledge from Chinese to English in their academic writing.

Both years' data point to the usefulness of translation in advanced English learning. The students claimed that translating the English abstracts to Chinese helped them grasp the main arguments and findings of the articles. Translating their thoughts from Chinese to English, although resulting in some awkward sentence structures, helped them with the overall organization and idea development of their writing. The reading-to-writing cycle, without any doubt, facilitated the participants' translation of knowledge and thoughts from Chinese to English. However, translation is far from enough for the doctoral level academic writing. Bigger issues lay ahead for these novice academic writers.

Critical Thinking Skills and Text Borrowing

Using critical thinking skills was the biggest challenge to the students, who had not been trained to use them in English academic writing. They tended to fill the pages with appreciation of the published work without integrating their own views, not to say identifying any gaps or problems. One participant said:

My biggest gain from this course is that I realized vocabulary is not the most critical in academic writing; it is how to follow the English way of thinking. When we were asked to read two articles and write a commentary, I thought it was simply copy the articles' content...Not allowing us to copy the author's words, it was too difficult! But after your analysis in class, especially comparing and contrasting different functions of expressions, I started to get some sense.

Developing the students' critical thinking skills was emphasized by the instructor. To help the students understand the goal of critical review, the instructor made the analogy of "standing on the shoulders of giants". The students were required to consider these questions in the process of searching for literature, reading, and writing: Where can I find the giant? Who is the giant? How can I build upon the giant's work? They were asked to read with critical eyes and look for research gaps. The focus of such reading was not on appreciating the strengths, which were evident after the scrutiny of peer review before publication. The challenge was to identify knowledge gaps and issues that were not or insufficiently addressed. Such an approach facilitated the students in locating the focus of their reading and writing.

Lacking critical thinking skills also affected the student's ability in making claims and providing support. The presupposition of instruction in academic writing is normally that students know how to make claims and support their views. However, these students were found to make bold, unjustified claims without evidence, or broad generalizations without hedging. When asked to use evidence, the students tended to copy evidence from the literature and considered that as their own. Their writing was packed with borrowed ideas without own voice or perspective. They believed that it was the right way to do academic writing. Some even argued with the instructor about the legitimacy of their text borrowing and refused any accusation of plagiarism. This issue was evident throughout the two years of instruction, showing that it was quite a stubborn problem and required extended discussion.

Genre Awareness in Chinese and English Academic Writing

The writing tasks represented different genres of writing (commentary, report, research proposal), and required the students' knowledge of genre differences between Chinese and English writing, and between general and academic English writing. The college English instruction in China covers essay writing in general as it is a tested area in national exams but lacks a focus on genre awareness. The students in this study demonstrated this weakness. What a participant said was illustrative: "In the past, when I had to write anything complicated, it was translation, look at others' writing and imitate, not knowing genre and such things. It is even more convenient now with Internet, do a Baidu, and see how others write..."

Based on their understanding of learning from previous education—learning is memorizing and internalizing, they made a big effort to show what and how much they learned from the readings.

For them, commentaries were supposed to interpret what can be learned from the original texts that they chose for the class rather than sharing their own views. They generalized what the texts presented to the readers, as if mastery of the ideas in the texts was all they needed in writing the commentary. When asked why they wrote the way they did, the students said that it was the way they learned to write in Chinese and they were not aware of a different way of doing it.

Their writing also indicated lack of knowledge and skills of English academic writing in terms of formality, referencing style, reader awareness and genre awareness. For example, in the proposal writing, the students mixed formal and professional terms with informal vocabulary. They randomly quoted the phrases or terms without indication of the original sources. Their intended readership seemed a vague general population, not an educated group of their particular field. As a result, they emphasized the importance of the papers not by convincing the readers but by appealing to their emotional agreement, such as “These important studies are greatly impacting me to go on and think about what I can do in the following studies”.

Not knowing how to write a critical commentary, the students simply repeated the procedures, methods, and the results of the studies they had read, with no evaluation of or comments on their contributions to the field. In interviews, the students had trouble answering why they had read the papers and what they should have presented in their writing. Their commentaries were full of descriptions of what they had read. Their way of showing sophistication was to replace the original wording with synonyms.

Through this EAP course, the participants identified apparent improvement in their genre knowledge in writing different academic texts, such as a commentary, or a proposal. One student particularly pointed out the helpfulness of analyzing the “unacceptable” writing tasks presented in class. They learned a lot from their own errors and trials.

Researcher in Action and Instructional Improvement

In this action research, we aimed at developing a more efficient approach to teaching English academic writing to Chinese graduate students. The two-year cycle allowed us to test and adjust the process-genre approach through a series of reading-to-writing tasks. Data analysis indicated a general trend of progress in the students’ writing and the effectiveness of the guideline questions. One example was that the acceptance rate of the submitted draft of writing tasks rose steadily in both years. Notably, the acceptance rate increased significantly from the 2010 class to the 2011 class. Table 2 below provides some brief statistics in this regard.

Table 2. Comparison of Acceptance Rates of 4 Writing Tasks in 2010 and 2011

Year	Writing Task 1	Writing Task 2	Writing Task 3	Writing Task 4
2010	32%	43%	62%	58%

2011

53%

61%

81%

72%

The major reason for such increases in the year 2011 was that the course was better organized and delivered in the second year based on the students' feedback and research results from the first year. In addition, students' communication across years facilitated the learning of the second group in 2011.

In terms of communication, since students were from the same department and some even worked in the same research team in their areas, they were able to talk with one another often and the upper year students passed on what they had learned to the lower year, both in person and online. The researcher on-site highly recommended the communication among the students and was available to answer questions promptly. Such close communication greatly facilitated the learning of the second-year students.

The researchers paid special attention to the issues identified in the first year so that material selection, assignment design, and instructional strategies were adjusted to enhance students' success in the second year. The results were affirming.

Material wise, the instructor added discussion articles published in *Science* to show the students how experts commented on others' work. Such reading and discussion elevated the students' ability to read critically and model experts' ways of critical thinking. It also helped the students break their superstition of experts' work being impeccable.

In terms of the assignments and instruction, the instructor made further clarification for some tasks. In the first year, students were asked to work on the research proposal toward the last two weeks of the term. They were left without enough time. In the second year, the instructor made the final task clear to students at the beginning of the term so that they were aware of the ultimate expectations for them. Their learning over the term was more goal-oriented. Their questions regarding the research proposal were answered promptly and discussed thoroughly in class. By the time they got to the proposal writing stage, they had a fairly good idea how and what to do with the task.

Writing Task 2 was a group commentary. Efficiency was a problem in the first year when the students had trouble finding times to meet online. When they did meet, some tended to wander off track to avoid working on the task. In year two, the students were required to take notes of their in-class discussions and coordinate their tasks and focus so that their online discussions were task-based and to the point. The split of tasks distributed the responsibilities to every member of the group so they shared similar level of pressure but were not overwhelmed with the entire assignment.

Writing Task 4, the research proposal, was a new concept and new genre to the students. They were not required to write research proposals in their program and therefore not familiar with the format and process of writing one. In the first year, the researchers assumed students' knowledge about the proposal, but the results indicated an obvious gap in the students' range of knowledge. In the second year, the instructor provided detailed information on the components and format of research proposals and discussed the questions students raised explicitly in class.

Due to group members' different English proficiencies and work styles, the process of reading, discussing, drafting, proofreading, submitting or resubmitting could be delayed, and successful

submission of the final draft by the deadline could be jeopardized. In the 2011 class, a flexible submission schedule was introduced so that the students had up to four weeks' extension to submit their final task.

Another difficult point revealed by the 2010 data concerned peer review, which the instructor made an effort to scaffold in the second year. The students had no prior experience of doing peer review. In the first year's proposal writing, students were required to review each other's draft before submission, but most sidestepped it. This is not an uncommon phenomenon in the Chinese context where students are unwilling to provide peer feedback to maintain group harmony and for a lack of confidence in self and peer abilities (e.g., McGroarty & Zhu, 1997; Mendonga & Johnson, 1994). In the second year, after in-class discussions and practice, the students were asked to indicate explicitly who reviewed their drafts and what comments on content, organization, and editorial issues they had received. The requirement put the students to task and their submissions were of obvious higher quality. The following are two examples of a "claim-making" activity on the topic of Internet, showing differences between the "Before" and "After" peer-feedback versions:

Before: The Internet sees the information explosion. Too much new information makes us have to spend more time on the Internet.

After: The Internet has brought us into a rich era of information explosion. The burden of much of the new information has deprived us of the closer attention to the completion of knowledge, but instead, attracted us into the fragments of the occurrences.

Before: Despite the fact that the Internet has given us more freedom, our privacy has been spied. For example, because of the freedom, the rumors become out of control and fake goods are sold more widely in the world.

After: Countering the fact that the Internet accounts for the greater freedom than ever in human history, the boundary of privacy has been severely blurred thus discussed widely as a legitimate concern. The typical examples can be seen from the rumors and fake articles which are spread at an unexpected rate.

Discussion

Looking back at the data and our research process, we saw, among other issues, deficiencies in graduate students' academic reading and writing in English and the steep curves faced by instructors and students in EAP teaching and learning approaches in the Chinese context, as well as the disconnections of the university policy-making with curriculum development regarding graduate English evaluation. We will elaborate on these points below.

Deficit in English Reading and Challenges in Teaching Academic Writing

The requirement that doctoral candidates publish papers in peer-reviewed English journals presupposed that students were strong enough in academic reading and writing in English. However, our two-year investigation suggested serious knowledge gaps in doctoral students' English reading and writing.

The EAP curriculum in the university separated academic reading (disciplinary knowledge) from academic writing (for publishing). The "reading for disciplinary knowledge" orientation rendered

the course texts to focus on general entry-level contents which had little to do students' research interests. More than half of the PhD candidates in the EAP class had never read English journal articles related to their research in their master's program or any master's level English classes. Therefore, students relied on reading texts in the Chinese language to obtain their disciplinary knowledge. They were unfamiliar with English publications in their own fields. On the other hand, teaching academic writing was considered by both instructors and students as a means toward academic publications, a far-fetched goal. In the first place, the students did not possess the subject knowledge that was published in English. In the second place, they had no prior training in academic writing, except for short essay writing in their graduate English classes. The gap between the students' real abilities and those required for publishing papers was enormous. As one doctoral student said, "this paper drafting process made me start to doubt about why I need to learn English and how much on earth I have learned for more than 10 years".

Having been accustomed to the conventional writing instructional approach in China's universities, which was appreciating a sample text with a focus on language use, the students had difficulties doing a "discourse analysis" of academic articles of their own choice. The students' expectations for the class were affected by their way of thinking about academic writing, which was scholarly tasks for their degrees. Reading academic books selected by their professors meant learning from scholars, and the way to evaluate their learning was through tests on the contents rather than their own reflective or commentary views. As a result, the students had great barriers in understanding the process approach in this class. They repeatedly requested to see "a sample" while doing drafting, peer-reviewing, or commenting. They were uncertain about the meaning of such terms as context, discourse, reader awareness, and genre.

While instructors followed the process-genre approach in teaching, assuming students' knowledge about the approach, the students were obviously not ready. The teaching approach was so new a concept for them that they had trouble grasping the basic procedures. This phenomenon reflected the gap in the instruction of EAP in China's higher learning. One of the procedures of the process-genre approach was peer-feedback. It was not a familiar or preferred activity for Chinese EFL learners in general (Miao, Badger, & Zhen, 2006; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Zhang, 1995), or for the participants in particular. The key, therefore, became how instructors could motivate them to learn to do it. Recent studies indicated that students' motives in forming scholarly communities and in meeting the requirements of the social contexts could influence their participation in peer-feedback activities and subsequent revisions (Man, Xu, & O'Toole, 2017; Yu & Lee, 2015; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012). This is a point proved in our study, and a point worthy of consideration by EAP writing instructors and researchers.

Disconnections in Policy-Making, Curricula, and Evaluation Regarding Academic English

The university policies regarding the entrance and exit English competencies of graduate students play a guiding role in curriculum design and implementation. However, when the policies misguide, problems occur.

One of the issues that surfaced in this research was the double standards regarding English proficiency in doctoral student recruitment. The university, being one of the best in China, maintained a high standard in admissions for applicants from other universities. However, it offered a streamlined master's-to-doctorate (硕博连读) program for students on its own master's

programs so that the selected students were exempt from the entrance exams, including the academic English exam, and taking academic English courses, required for doctoral studies. As a result, supervisors of the students in this category felt the pressure of gatekeeping academic English competencies of these students, which was not the expertise of the supervisors. They had to rely heavily on the language test results during the students' master's studies to avoid enrolling students with lower English proficiency. While the test-driven instruction and evaluation failed to improve the students' academic writing competencies, the requirement of publishing in the duration of the students' doctoral studies became a daunting task for both the students and their supervisors. Since these students were exempt from taking EAP courses, they were not properly supported toward publishing in English academic journals indexed in SCI or SSCI, the exit requirement for their doctoral degrees.

On the other hand, the students in the EAP classes were left thinking that they had to be here simply to improve their English and the courses had little to do with their future disciplinary development. They demonstrated huge anxiety in terms of lifting their English competencies to the level of academic publishing. However, they were confused with how they could achieve the goal. Since there was no criteria for measuring the efficiency of EAP instruction, some instructors, without in-service education opportunities, were not motivated to explore pedagogies that would meet the students' needs. As a matter of fact, the instructors felt rather constrained because they indeed lacked subject knowledge in their students' areas of research and were unable to help. The supervisors, coming from the generation who did not have to publish in English in order to reach where they were, felt helpless as well with their students' English writing skills.

In addition, English as a credit bearing course throughout all levels from undergraduate to doctoral programs in the university, did not follow consistent curricula. For example, the doctoral program offered academic writing and the master's program provided practical English, the latter also covering academic writing. However, the distinction of the goals for the two courses were unclear and unexamined. A master's student who intended to pursue doctoral study was required to take an entrance exam of English on reading general topics and writing a short essay only; advanced writing skills were not a prerequisite for admission. Therefore, it was impossible to tell if the student possessed the required "academic communication skills" for a doctoral program. There was also no evidence with regard to the effectiveness of the different English courses. As a result, students in the doctoral programs were in a broad spectrum in terms of academic English skills, with some still considering academic English as mastering basic grammatical structures and vocabulary.

For all the above factors, the university policies for publishing doctoral work seemed to have not been built on solid ground. The gaps between policies and curricula need to be addressed first and foremost.

Conclusion and Implications

The present study has explored the process of how advanced EFL students familiarize themselves with western academic writing conventions and use critical thinking skills in their writings with a focus on the factors facilitating the learning process. The findings show that explicit teaching of academic writing skills through a process-genre approach (Badger & White, 2000) seems efficient in transforming the EFL students into employing a wide range of academic writing strategies while facilitating the skills learning process in a China's EFL context.

As far as the process-genre approach is concerned, the students strongly affirmed its feasibility in this advanced EAP program. The cycle of reading-to-writing proved to be very effective in learning to write academic texts when the students were able to learn from discipline-specific peer-reviewed journal articles. Given these students' lack of academic reading and writing experiences in the past, this EAP program guided them through the four reading and writing stages and provided them with the hands-on opportunity to practice academic writing skills and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, adoption of the English journal review criteria in the evaluation of the students' writing greatly enhanced their interest in the appropriate genre and language style for academic writing in their respective fields.

Two years of this innovative approach in teaching advanced EAP in the EFL context and two years of study of the program yielded results and insights that may be applicable to other similar settings. Teachers of EAP do not have to be the experts in their students' field of research. However, they can act as facilitators in students' exploration of English academic writing. This approach encourages students to be independent learners and the agents of their own learning. It also provides the students with the skills and resources for their future research writing.

We would like to point out that the traditional focus on advanced linguistic skills in graduate EAP classes need to be reviewed. With heightened requirements for and expectations from doctoral students in today's Chinese context, disciplinary knowledge need to be integrated in EAP instruction. The adoption of the process-genre approach requires EAP instructors to update their teaching approaches and knowledge ranges. It also requires joint efforts of the EAP instructors and discipline supervisors to support the doctoral candidates in the duration of their programs. Genres are not fixed, nor is the knowledge of disciplinary genres, which instructors need to incorporate in teaching (Cheng, 2008, 2015; Tardy, 2009, 2016). It is also evident that instructor's own critical thinking skills affect their teaching and their students' learning of academic writing skills, hence the importance of instructors' in-service training and support programs for students (Li, 2011; Lo, 2010, 2011; Mok, 2009).

A yet bigger issue, however, is the curricula design of the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral EAP courses so that the contents and skill sets learned from these courses align with students' needs. At the policy level, while it is far-sighted for universities to aim at developing students' "international perspectives" (国际视野), the requirements for doctoral students to publish in top tier English academic journals need to be better justified.

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Appendix

Guidelines for Critical Reading of Academic Papers

(Please reference the following general and specific questions when you read and analyze the articles of your choice.)

I. Questions Related to Linguistic Features (in General)

In terms of sensitivity to academic discourse

1. How could writers achieve precision and objectivity in English academic writing?
2. Would a writer's preference of using everyday language, such as, 'find' or 'look into' instead of 'identify' or 'investigate', reminds readers of an immature writer?
3. To what extent should a writer invite 'self' (e.g., 'I' or 'we') into the text while constructing a voice of authority in the paper?
4. Could a new writer mimic the informal expressions used by some expert writers in the field?

In terms of selection of lexical items

5. How would new writers acquire appropriate academic expressions that meet the standards of editors and reviewers, such as the use of 'questionable' instead of 'wrong' when presenting arguments?
6. Why are some terminologies preferable in some disciplines while others are dynamic in different research areas?
7. Would ignorance of the nuances between some synonyms, like discourse and language, acquisition and learning, lead to bias among the reviewers?

In terms of syntactical construct

8. Does the pursuit of accuracy always demand use of long sentences? Would complexity of sentence structures indicate complicated ideas?
9. Does frequent use of passive voice help elevate the quality of a paper while the writer aims at enhancing persuasiveness and objectivity?
10. In research presentations, which is better in verb tense choice, the natural forms of past, present and future tenses, or the simple, present tenses?

II. Questions Related to Generic Features (in General)

In terms of construct of research papers

11. What are the major elements of a typical research paper? What are the main functions of the body of such a paper?
12. What are the essential elements of the methodology of a research paper?
13. What are the main differences between the abstract and the conclusion of a paper? What information can be repeated in both parts?
14. What are the features of the in-text citations and the reference list?

In terms of organization of research papers

15. When does a writer integrate the literature review with the introduction? Where in a paper should the research questions or the research gap be presented?
16. What is the typical order to present methodology in a paper?
17. In which cases would the discussion be combined with the conclusion? And is the discussion always a necessary part in a paper?

In terms of presentation of research papers

18. How do writers emphasize their major points? What writing techniques are employed?
19. How do writers keep consistency in writing style and variations in language use?
20. How do writers achieve conciseness in documenting the research process and accuracy in data presentation?

III. Questions Related to Argumentation Development (Specific to the Selected Articles)

In terms of claim and support

21. Does the conventional structure of research development (PPF: previous study – present study – further study) work in this paper?
22. Are the paper's arguments related to its contributions? How does the writer fit his/her argument into the paper's contributions?
23. Does the writer present his/her reflections on the research with limitations or applications, and why?
24. What structural strategies are used to present the research design?

In terms of problem and solution

25. What is the research domain of this paper? Does the problem identified in the paper capture the real-world issues in this domain?
26. Is the solution presented in the paper still reliable in the current research context? Are there any other solutions to the problem?
27. Is the research still replicable in the present research background?

In terms of credibility and authority

28. Has the paper been cited by others? What is the citation frequency?
29. Are the author's credentials revealed or reflected in certain ways in the paper? Are there any other follow-up studies conducted or papers published?
30. Among other similar studies on the same research topic, how would you rate the credibility and authoritativeness of this one?

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