

**An investigation into the thesis/dissertation writing
experiences of Mandarin-speaking Masters students in
New Zealand**

By

Evelyn Chiungying Chang

張瓊瑩

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Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of Mandarin-speaking Masters students involved in the thesis/dissertation writing process. As Mandarin-speaking students form a sizeable part of the EAL [English as Additional Language] postgraduate cohort in New Zealand, it is important to explore their experiences. The aim of the proposed study is to provide an opportunity for these learners to express issues that are pertinent to them in this area.

The study recruited 37 Masters students from five universities to participate in the survey; 6 of these participants volunteered to be interviewed. Two aspects of the participants' perceptions were examined: the acquisition of academic literacies in English, and the role of the supervisor in relation to their thesis writing. Findings indicated that students had underestimated how difficult it would be to study at this level in a foreign language and in a new sociocultural environment. They also indicated that the language assistance provided by supervisors was perceived to be very helpful and that mutual understanding and personal interaction between supervisors and students is crucial for successful supervision. However, better structured academic and pastoral support is required from the host universities. In addition, participants placed great emphasis on their personal growth and learning.

The significance of the study lies in its cross-cultural accounts of the underlying complexities involved in EAL thesis writing. Findings underline the need for New Zealand universities to recognise the importance of cross-cultural awareness and its role in fostering campuses that are interculturally friendly.

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Attestation of authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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20 months ago, I arrived at New Zealand with a vision of having a different life. It turned out to be quite a different life. I am very blessed to be in this land.

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1 Introduction

The position of English as the dominant language in this global age and the growing importance of Asian countries' economic status in the world, has led many Asian students to undertake their higher education in the West (Kirby, Woodhouse, & Ma, 1996). Within New Zealand, a report from the Ministry of Education shows that overseas fee-paying students are now 'an established part of the New Zealand scene' (Ministry of Education, 2005a). In 2004, the export education industry was estimated to have contributed \$2.21 billion to New Zealand's Gross Domestic Product (Ministry of Education, 2006). In the same year, about 85% of foreign fee-paying students at tertiary level came from Asia. For approximately 76% of these students, Mandarin was their first language. This includes students from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Ministry of Education, 2005b). The impact these incoming students have made on the host country are both economic and academic. Hence, it is worthwhile exploring their study experiences in this context.

1.1 Purposes of the study

Paralleling this educational trend is the growing body of research in the acquisition of [English as] a second language (L2) academic literacy in *Western* countries¹. Within

¹ The use of this term will be discussed in Section 1.3.

the arena of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), for instance, there has been substantial growth in the literature focusing on EAL thesis/dissertation writing² since the late 1990's (e.g. see Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz, & Nunan, 1998; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Cadman, 1997; Canagarajah, 2001; Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1997; Dong, 1998; Hyland, 2004; Strauss & Walton, 2005; Strauss, Walton, & Madsen, 2003). Overall, the majority of studies were made by Western academics, and hence represented a fairly Western pedagogical perspective. Major issues such as language, genre, supervision, power and identity were identified and ways of supporting those learning difficulties have been proposed. It seems, however, that the actual complexities involved in EAL thesis writing have not yet been fully captured. That is, the voices of EAL thesis writers have not received sufficient attention..

This study investigates the thesis writing process of Mandarin-speaking Masters students in New Zealand. It takes the opportunity to explore their cross-cultural study experiences, particularly with regard to EAL thesis writing. The study accentuates participants' agency and features their perceptions of the learning passage and their adaption to Western academic milieu. It is expected that the proposed research will contribute usefully to this relatively new area by highlighting key issues and realities

² In New Zealand, either a thesis or a dissertation is required of a student to complete a Research Masters. This study uses 'thesis' to refer to both.

from the viewpoint of EAL learners.

1.2 Research questions

Based on the literature review and theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2, the study aims to explore three questions:

- What do Mandarin-speaking Masters students at New Zealand universities perceive as major challenges in the thesis writing process?
- What do they do to overcome these challenges?
- How do they evaluate the support they receive from their universities?

Students from 5 universities in New Zealand completed a survey through which an overview of participants' learning circumstances was obtained. A number of the survey participants volunteered to take part in interviews to explore, in greater depth, issues raised in the survey. This resulted in enriched data which captured the complexities addressed in the literature review. The survey results showed that around 60% of the sample did not perceive English language, genre knowledge of the thesis, structuring of their writings and adjusting to Western critical thinking as difficulties, whereas the other 40% did. Participants relied significantly on self-study and assistance from supervisors and peers. Data from interviews further indicated that emotional support from supervisors and their social networks with peers play important role in facilitating thesis writing process. The results also suggest that greater support is needed to meet EAL thesis writers' needs.

1.3 The use of the term ‘West/Western’ in the study

The term ‘West’ or ‘Western’ in this study is used for convenience. The caveat of ‘oversimplification’ (Reagan, 2000, p.10) needs to be stressed here. Similar to many other concepts humans have or use, terms like ‘the West’ or ‘the East’ imply ‘biased and loaded assumptions’ (Reagan, 2000, p.10). Reagan (2000) contends that the dichotomy of Western/Non-Western or the East/West ‘although heuristically useful, is in fact misleading’ (p.10). This seemingly self-evident concept, in fact, has no substantiality, because a place in the physical world called *the West* does not exist. However, conceptually, it does exist in human minds.

Thus, in the context of the study, the label ‘the West’ is used to mean English-speaking countries. Accordingly, the term ‘Westerner’ in the study indicates the native speakers of these countries.

1.4 Overview of the thesis

The thesis consists of seven chapters. The literature review is presented in two sections. Firstly, the Confucian concept of learning will be explained, drawing on both Mandarin and English literature. The second part of the review focuses on the Western academic context in which issues of EAL thesis writing are embedded. The notion of academic literacies is presented as a conceptual framework; and various challenges facing EAL learners in actual thesis writing will be discussed.

The methodology is presented in Chapter Three. This study is essentially qualitative, utilizing both survey and interview as instruments for data collection. The issues of the

translation and transcription of interview data, the researcher's role, sample recruitment and data analysis are explained respectively.

Chapter Four outlines the findings of the surveys. The results of each question are reported in the form of figures and tables, followed by explanations.

Interview findings are presented in Chapter Five. Data are categorized into four main themes: language issues, supervision, university support and personal milestones. Each theme is broken down into various subtopics.

Chapter Six draws the data together, focusing on the discussion of three issues. The limitation of the study and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

2 Literature Review

In this chapter, a brief outline of Confucian thoughts on learning will be provided, followed by a discussion of academic literacies in the context of Western universities. The difficulties encountered by EAL learners in the actual thesis writing process are examined.

2.1 The Confucian philosophy of learning

As one of the greatest philosophers and educators of ancient China, the teachings of Confucius have been immensely influential in Chinese civilisation (Chan, 1973, p. 14). This is the culture which the participants in this study share. His dialogues with students were recorded in the book *Analects*, produced by his students after his death in 479B.C. (Ma, 2005). Although this study does not suggest that Confucius was the only source of Chinese educational and cultural philosophy, ‘to a considerable extent one could argue that traditional Chinese educational thought in large part *is* (author’s italic) Confucian educational thought’ (Reagan, 2000, p. 105). In the context of the present study, it is necessary to briefly discuss Confucius’s insights on learning, drawing on literature in both Mandarin and English.

In the whole texts of *Analects*, the character 學, ‘learning’, was used far more

frequently than the character 教, 'teaching' (Chen, 2005)³. The first chapter of *Analects* is called 學而篇 which can be translated as The Chapter of 'Great Learning' (Chan, 1973, p. 14). Indeed, 'one of Confucius' s legacies is the very idea of a love or passion for learning' (Li, 2003, p. 147).

Humanism is central to the philosophy of Confucius (Chan, 1973; Chen, 2005; Kim, 2003); his educational thought is premised on the ideal of the 'whole person' (Chen, 2005, p. 205), whose agency is in charge of 'the act of "learning" and self-discipline in the educational process' (Chen, 2005, p. 205). Chen (2005) points out that, for Confucius, learning is the core of the process of education, particularly in terms of reflective self-education, and life-long learning.

On a micro level, according to Confucius, one has to study and internalise the materials of knowledge from classic doctrines and literature to learn the ancient wisdom (Chen, 2005). On a macro level, learning is ultimately to enable one to become a 君子 (pronounced as chün-tzu), literally meaning 'son of the ruler' (Chan, 1973, p. 15). In English, the closest term to 君子 is 'gentleman' (Lau, 2002; Waley, 2000), 'superior man' (Chan, 1973) or 'sage' (Chen, 2005). For a 君子, learning worldly knowledge is secondary to learning and practising 道—the Way (Chen, 2005). The Way represents an ethical and harmonious way of relating to one's family, society, and the state. Underlying this concern of 'personal cultivation' (Li, 2003, p. 146) is a world view of how to be a better and more moral person in relating to others. That is, the

³ The reference of this article in Mandarin (陳來, 2005) is placed at the end of the reference list.

self-knowledge or self-realisation which one pursues includes one's relationship with the outside world.

To sum up, the Confucian epistemology emphasises that the whole practice of learning or self-education is not merely a matter of pursuing knowledge from the ancient intellectual tradition, but in the way that learners aspire to embark on life-long learning and a moral way of living in the world.

2.1.1 The so-called 'pragmatic' aspect of Confucian learning

The debate over the pragmatism of Chinese learners is reported in the literature (On, 1996; Tweed & Lehman, 2002, , 2003). Tweed and Lehman (2003) define pragmatism as a focus on learning outcome and argue that pragmatism is a 'characteristic both of Confucius and of modern Chinese cultural influences on learning' (p.148). In an earlier article (2002), they assert that 'culturally Chinese learners are more likely to focus on practical outcome of education than are culturally Western learners' (p.94). The authors believe that this is opposed to the Western philosophical paradigm that learning should be for its own sake (p.95). However, there is much evidence to refute this assertion about Chinese learners. In the first place Confucius said:

To be fond of it [learning] is better than merely to know it, to find joy in it is better than merely to be fond of it (translated by Waley, 2000, p.83).

While it is acknowledged that there is a focus on learning outcomes, this focus is a historical residue, dating back to the civil service examination system which originated in the seventh century. This system sought to 'select best scholars to serve the government' (Li, 2003, p. 147). Even today for example, both in China and Taiwan, the

university entrance examination is still the main channel via which young people enter higher education. The pragmatism that Tweed and Lehman (2003) refer to may have more to do with the political and social context in which the examination system occurs than with Confucius's teaching.

2.1.2 Confucius and critical thinking

There appears to be an assumption among some researchers that 'Confucian learning does not emphasise critical thinking' (Kim, 2003, p. 86). For example, Tweed and Lehman (2002) note:

For Confucius, unlike Socrates, learning is not focused mainly on questioning, evaluating, and generating knowledge because truth is not found primarily in the self...Confucius to some extent expected his students to sift his teachings and find things out for themselves, but unlike Socrates, Confucius did not encourage an educative task focused mainly on searching individualistically for truth (p.92).

At first glance, the statement appears to show an 'epistemological racism' (Cadman, 2003, p. 1) in putting Socrates as a point of reference. Moreover, the authors seem unaware of one of the most fundamental teachings of Confucius:

He who learns but does not think, is lost. He who thinks but does not learn is in great danger (translated by Waley, 2000, p. 83).

Kim (2003) differs from Tweed and Lehman, arguing that Confucius's view of learning 'not only is compatible with critical thinking, it includes it' (p.85). He explains that the nature and process of Confucian learning encompasses two stages. The first stage is 'accumulation of the material knowledge' (p.80), and the second stage is 'reflection on the materials of knowledge' (p.80) and 'reflection on oneself' (p.80).

Two points are offered here as a conclusion of this section. First, given that ‘Confucius’s view of learning in the *Analects* entails critical thinking’ (Kim, 2003), this is clearly not a concept that is foreign to Chinese learners. Secondly, the way in which Kim accounts for Confucius’s stages of learning closely parallels the Western conception of knowledge consuming and knowledge transforming (Tardy, 2005), which signifies the hierarchical phases of knowledge pursuing.

2.2 The Western approach to higher education

2.2.1 Defining literacies

The discussion on the Confucian philosophy of learning has been provided to situate participants in the context of the study. Obviously there are differences between the Confucian and the Western approaches to learning but it is beyond the scope of the study to explore these differences. The present study focuses on academic literacy within the Western postgraduate scene. Hence, it is necessary to discuss what it means to become academically literate in a Western higher education setting.

Johns (1997) employing the term ‘academic literacies’ sees these literacies as multiple and socially situated phenomena in which learners are immersed. Christie (1993, as cited in Johns, 1997) contends that learners are ‘social beings, achieving a sense of identity through learning to enter with increasing confidence into ways of working’ (p.100) within particular communities. When considering EAL postgraduate learners, Braine (2002) emphasises that ‘the concept of academic literacy extends beyond the ability to read and write’ (p.59). It encompasses ‘ways of knowing particular content, languages, and practices’ (Johns, 1997, p. 2). In other words, gaining mastery of

academic literacies requires an insider's knowledge of and ability to engage in 'legitimate [English] discourses' (Reagan, 2005, p. 11). Leki (1992) points out that writing is inherently difficult for both native speakers and non-native speakers.

For EAL postgraduate learners, the process of becoming academically literate in a new Western academic setting is indeed complex and bewildering (Braine, 2002; Johns, 1997). These challenging situations are perhaps most evident during the stage of thesis writing when they, as novices, have to cope with a huge workload, and negotiate the complex power relations involved in supervision. Normally, thesis writing constitutes a large part of disciplinary acculturation (Phusawisot, 2003), through which learners' academic literacies are acquired. In reality, this progression of learning-to-write within a discipline is fraught with on-going tension and contestation, as will be seen in Section 2.2.2. .

2.2.1.1. Academic literacies and EAL thesis writing

Jones (1999) states that '[s]econd language development involves engaging with the language at different levels and types of consciousness' (p.41). Since the main theme of this study is EAL thesis writing, it is useful to distinguish the different levels of the learning-to-write process that EAL postgraduate learners engage in, to highlight the complexities involved. The study borrows Lea and Street's (2000) three models of students' writing to illustrate the different dimensions within the writing passage. The proposed study utilises these three models and attempts to interpret them from the learners' point of view to highlight key issues for this study. In common with Lea and Street, the proposed study privileges the last of these three models: the 'Academic Literacies approach'.

Writing as study skills

The first approach views writing as decontextualised study skills. Underlying this view is the assumption that writing requires the mastery of certain sets of skills that can be learnt and transferred to another context (Lea & Street, 2000). According to Lea and Street (2000), the focus of this perspective for teaching staff is on ‘attempts to “fix” problems with students learning, which are treated as a kind of pathology’ (p.34). As noted, such a problem-oriented approach, from the students’ point of view, is itself problematic (Sung, 2000). As Sung (2000) observes:

The literature tend[sic] to focus on what these [EAL] students cannot do in their study or their unfitness and failure for studying in the United States. In fact, only a very small number of studies on international students have been interested in what those students can do to overcome their language barriers and as a result succeeded in their studies (p.4).

However, a number of educators are highly aware of this ‘deficit thinking’ (Canagarajah, 2002; Lea & Street, 2000; Zamel, 1998b) which looks at what EAL learners cannot do, using the criterion of English in its context as first language. They warn that not going beyond problem identification will lead to a deficit model that will prove to be less than helpful. Canagarajah (2002) calls this ‘difference-as-deficit’ and points out that :

We shouldn’t be surprised that L2 students fall short when L1 writing is treated as the norm or point of reference (p.12).

One of the consequences of this deficit thinking might be a lack of empathy. Robertson et al. (2000) conducted a study to survey the perceptions of staff as well as international students on students’ general difficulties in studying at the university. They discovered that ‘there appears a shortfall in empathy shown in many of the staff responses’ (p.101). Lea and Street (2000) state that ‘In recent years the crudity and

insensitivity of this approach have led to the refinement of the meaning of “skills” involved and attention to broader issues of learning and social context’ (p.34). They call this evolved approach ‘academic socialization’ (p.34) which leads to the next level of writing.

Writing as academic socialisation

The second level of writing views writing as a process of socialisation, in that the writers are gradually inducted into a particular cultural and cognitive tradition (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 34). According to this view, thesis writing within a discipline, whether in one’s first or second language, can be regarded as a kind of socialisation process (Dong, 1998).

There are two debatable points underlying this approach. First, there is a possibility that the dominant academic practices are taken for granted and therefore remain unchallenged (Lea & Street, 2000). The assumption that Western academic practices are central and monolithic does not fully reflect the reality. As a matter of fact, incoming students from non-Western backgrounds are, in the meantime, equally shaping the practices of those institutions (Chryssochoou, 2004; Denicolo & Pope, 1999). Second, even though this approach recognises contextual elements in students’ writing as crucial (Lea & Street, 2000), the focus of this approach is on students being *initiated* and *oriented* into new learning practices. As a result, the uniqueness and power of individual students tends to be ignored.

Writing as social practices

The importance of recognizing the uniqueness and power of individual learners is acknowledged by Lea and Street (2000). For the third level of the model, they coin the

title ‘academic literacies approach’ (p.34) in which learning and writing are regarded ‘as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialization’ (p.35). Despite the fact that Bronson (2004) adopts the term ‘Language socialization’ (p.13) for his discussion, he supports this view of Lea and Street. He contends that:

Language socialization is not a simple one-way process by which students unproblematically “enter” a discourse community (Prior, 1998). Even as they are inducted into the norms of a community-of-practice, they retain the right to contest and negotiate the relations of power that inhere in that community. Professors and institutions can learn, change and adapt even as their students do (p.29).

These views are crucial to the study and in particular, the third model of Lea and Street is valuable in terms of interpreting EAL thesis writing for at least three reasons.

Firstly, literature in the area of EAL research shows that the acquisition of a second language in general, and disciplinary literacy in particular, involves the interplay of variables such as social, cultural, institutional and cognitive factors (e.g. see Bronson, 2004; Gao, 2006; Jiang, 2001; Morita, 2004; Myles & Cheng, 2003; Riazi, 1997; Sung, 2000; Wang & Wen, 2002). The contextualised nature of this model better accounts for the experiences of EAL postgraduate learners whose ‘possibilities’ (Canagarajah, 2001, p. 131) as well as their challenges within the writing process need to be revealed and understood.

Secondly, the academic literacies model provides an opportunity for EAL thesis writing to be viewed independently from English as a first language. Abe (2001) argues that to better understand the perspectives of EAL writers, it is essential to examine their experiences, using EAL writing as a frame of reference, rather than English as a native language. Consequently, Canagarajah (2001) advocates that ‘it is

important to focus on L2 writing acquisition in its own right and develop approaches unique to L2 if we are to construct an effective pedagogy for such students' (p.119).

Lea and Street (2000) explain that:

Viewing literacy from a cultural and social practice approach, rather than in terms of educational judgments about good and bad writing, and approaching meanings as contested can give us insights into the nature of academic literacy in particular and academic learning in general (p.33).

Likewise, Colombi and Schleppegrell (2002) take a similar approach:

Literacy cannot be thought of as something that is *achieved* [author's italic] once and for all. We need to understand literacy as a process of meaning-making that continuously evolves both in society and in the individual (p.2).

In the researcher's opinion, the academic literacies perspective allows space for learners to exhibit agency. This is the third reason that the academic literacies model is appropriate for addressing the agenda of EAL thesis writing. Within this framework, EAL postgraduate learners are not judged partially and superficially according to the skills they possess or the extent to which they demonstrate their 'fit' to the Western academy. Rather, each learner with his/her unique subjectivity and idiosyncrasy has the power to negotiate who they are and what counts as knowledge through their writing. The third level of writing brings to the fore the issues of power, identity and voice which are very relevant in the EAL postgraduate writing process (e.g. see Allison, 2003; Cadman, 1997; Canagarajah, 2001; Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Morita, 2004; Strauss & Walton, 2005).

Morita's (2004) study specifically addresses the dimension of the academic literacies

approach, although she chose to investigate participants' classroom oral activity, instead of writing. She conducted a multiple case study of six female Japanese Masters students in a Canadian university for an entire academic year, in an attempt to reveal how her participants negotiated their participation and identity and 'exercised their personal agency to take ownership of their learning' (p.574). Her data show that participants often have 'ascribed identities' (p.598) imposed by others, mostly relating to their limitations as second language speakers of English. That is, they are treated 'monolithically as linguistic or cultural minorities' (p.597). Particularly if such stereotypical views are held by powerful members such as lecturers, they tend to have a negative effect on students' active participation (p.598). The author challenges the 'ascribed identities' with her data, showing that 'a seemingly homogeneous group in terms of gender and cultural/linguistic background responded to and participated in their L2 classroom variously' (p.597). This is also allied with Gieve and Clark's (2005) research findings, which suggest that it is important to bear in mind the 'heterogeneity in supposedly homogeneous cultures of learning, and the danger of characterizing groups of learners with reductionist categories' (p.261). Overall, Morita's research points out that an individual learner's negotiation of identity, agency and participation is situated and constructed variously in different contexts where issues of language, individual idiosyncrasy and cognition, society, culture, power relation, discipline, curriculum, institution policy and pedagogy are all correlated to a certain degree. Accordingly, she contends that a contextualised analysis of the data is of vital importance in terms of understanding the complexities of EAL postgraduate learners' circumstances and their voices.

Oxford (2003) defines the meaning of 'agency' as:

The quality of being an active force in producing an effect, and an agent is one who has this quality. Psychologically speaking, a learner is an agent if s/he acts intentionally, which implies an intention or goal. However, in a broader context, a person's sense of agency can be blocked or encouraged by social and cultural conditions (p. 80).

It is part of the research goal to make explicit, from a participant's point of view, what situated factors impede or foster learners' learning outcomes and sense of agency. For instance, Morita (2004) and Bronson's (2004) findings both confirm the influential mediation of an instructor or professor in terms of facilitating or impeding learners' learning. As Bronson (2004) notes in his PhD study:

Importantly, L2 students' successful academic writing development was found in this study to depend in large measure on professors' willingness to negotiate tasks and their responsiveness to their students' special and individual needs (p.29-30).

When learners are 'encouraged by social and cultural conditions' as illustrated above, it is more likely that they will demonstrate their power, for example, by evaluating and making sense of what they perceive and learn. Yet, more often than not, this seems to be impossible without having demonstrated their advancement on the two previous writing levels. This is because, in actual practice, the three levels of writing are not a mutually exclusive process. Viewing the three models as being situated in a hierarchical relationship, Lea and Street (2000) themselves contend that:

[E]ach model successively encapsulates those above it, so that the academic socialization perspective takes account of study skills but includes them in the broader context of the acculturation processes...likewise the academic literacies approach encapsulates the academic socialization model, building on the insights developed there as well as the study skills view (p.33).

As an example, a good piece of writing must begin with correct grammar and spelling; display a discursive structure and knowledge of disciplinary rules that makes sense to the target audience. Having achieved the first two fundamental steps, it might then be possible to contribute one's insight or negotiate one's identity in light of previous work with 'modest but clearly defensible knowledge claims' (Sillitoe & Crosling, 1999, p. 168).

In the context of EAL postgraduate study, however, the literature suggests that often EAL learners do not look reflectively at their writing (Wu, Griffiths, Wisker, Walker, & Illes, 2001), due to their heavy workload and pressure of time (Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz, & Nunan, 1998; Okamura, 2006). This lack of self-reflection is also revealed in those studies that investigate the perceived writing difficulties of EAL postgraduate learners (e.g. see Allison, 2003; Cadman, 1997; Canagarajah, 2001; Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Strauss & Walton, 2005). It appears that issues of identities, voice and power are more frequently identified by educators than by the learners themselves. Again, it may well be that learners are too overwhelmed by the difficulties on the first two levels of writing to recognise the importance of addressing their own identities and voices in their writing. The hierarchical relations between the three models of writing are, therefore, plausible.

Russell (1997) captures the state of affairs succinctly, noting that 'disciplinary enculturation may be less a gradual absorption or assimilation and more a messy struggle' (p.229). This struggle indicates that it might be difficult for EAL postgraduate writers to reach the third level where individual aptitude is developed to the standard of 'knowledge-transforming' (Tardy, 2005, p. 325), instead of just being 'knowledge-telling' (Tardy, 2005, p. 325). Arguably, EAL postgraduate learners cannot

transform themselves from ‘consumers of knowledge to producers of knowledge’ (Aittola & Aittola, as cited in Ylijoki, 2001, p. 21) without asserting their authorship and identity in their writing. It has become evident that the requirement of knowledge construction in postgraduate study is closely associated with the dimension addressed by the Academic Literacies approach—voice, identity and power. As Tardy (2005) points out:

For student-researchers like graduate students, these advanced-level knowledge-transforming tasks are almost always difficult because they ask new researchers to wrestle with issues of their own identity as novices writing to and in a community of experts. Such tasks require not only subject-matter knowledge or formal genre knowledge, but also an understanding of how to write convincingly to expert readers (p.325-326).

In order to reach this level of knowledge transformation and to demonstrate this in the writing, a few scholars suggest that an awareness and capacity of advanced academic literacy is necessary (Hyland, 2004; Tardy, 2005).

2.2.1.2. Advanced academic literacy

According to Hamp-Lyons (2004), advanced academic literacy ‘entails a highly sophisticated awareness of the rhetorical and linguistic devices that typically shape the genre of research communication’ (p.89). Ferenz (2005) takes this notion a step further and defines it specifically for EAL learners: ‘L2 advanced academic literacy encompasses knowledge of rhetorical, linguistic, social and cultural features of academic discourses as well as knowledge of English’ (p.339). The rhetorical knowledge of advanced academic literacy is viewed as essential for convincing academic writing (Hyland, 2004). Further discussion on the relationship between the advanced academic literacy of EAL learners and their ability to establish authorship in

their writing will be discussed in 2.2.2.1. .

2.2.2 Challenges for EAL thesis writers

Most of the contributors to the area of EAL thesis writing are academics from countries of English-medium higher education providers: USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. One of these academics, Brian Paltridge (2002) makes a significant point on the nature of thesis writing:

Thesis and dissertation writing is a difficult process for native speaker students and often doubly so for non-native speaker students. ESL [English as a Second Language] students may have the level of language proficiency required for admission to their course of study, but not yet the necessary textual knowledge, genre knowledge and social knowledge (Bhatia, 1999) required of them to succeed in this particular setting (p.137).

The gap between what they have already learnt and what they will have to learn as soon as possible is manifested as *problems* much discussed in the Western literature. Despite the seemingly increased attention paid to EAL thesis writing, little is known about, in actual practice, how EAL learners strive to succeed and how adequately their host universities respond to their needs (Lee & Rice, in press).

2.2.2.1. The actual complexity of writing

New Sociocultural environment

Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Creighton and Warnes (2003) at the conclusion of their action research project involving EAL postgraduate learners observed:

For international postgraduates, the difficulties of working in another learning culture, a new social environment, are

compounded by coping with tertiary literacy issues, that is, being able to fully articulate complex ideas and arguments in a second language to a level befitting that of students' thought processes (p.93).

Indeed, English-only speakers might much better understand the hurdles that an EAL postgraduate learner has to overcome by envisaging a Westerner writing a 30,000-word research paper in, for example, academic Japanese while relocating her/himself in a new sociocultural location—Japan. Moreover, this student is not expected to criticise the Japanese lecturer publicly—supposing that her/his oral Japanese proficiency is good enough to express her/his thinking process, because s/he might run the risk of being considered rude or culturally insensitive. By putting oneself in the EAL learners' shoes, it becomes clear that the challenges that face a second language speaker of *any* language are, in fact, multiple. As Kirby, Woodhouse and Ma (1996) note:

Not only must they [EAL learners] master the content and concepts of their discipline, and do so through the medium of language which they may not fully command, but frequently they must do this within an educational and cultural context quite different from their own. These cognitive, linguistic and cultural challenges interact to restrict, or at least modify, the nature of learning (p.141).

This different environment inevitably leads to at least, some degree of culture shock. Brown (1986) explains culture shock as 'phenomena ranging from mild irritability to deep psychological panic and crisis' (p.35), and states that it is 'a common experience for a person learning a second language in a second culture' (p.35).

However, using culture as an explanation of all EAL writing issues is somewhat limited from a practical perspective, even though it is a very convenient solution (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). The argument over the influence of culture on EAL learners' writing, such as critical thinking or plagiarism, appears to be more an ideological

debate than a pedagogical one (e.g. X. Cheng, 2000; Liu, 2005; Sowden, 2005a, , 2005b). Canagariajah (2002) argues that it is questionable to treat cultural difference as a problem:

If these [EAL] students fail in English literacy, this is explained as resulting from the fact that they are strangers to the established discourses of the academy.....The cultural uniqueness of students is treated as *preventing* [author's italic] them from becoming successful writers in English, trapping them into their respective cultural/linguistic worlds (p.13).

In a similar way, speaking as a TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) professional, Kumaravadivelu (2003) offers his reflection:

If our students fail to interact in class the way we expect them to, or if they fail to show that they engage their minds the way we want them to, we readily explain their behavior in terms of culture and cultural stereotypes (p.717).

In reality, few EAL learners are fully prepared for the challenging situations they will face upon their arrival at their host institutions, and their difficulties will inevitably be exacerbated by the seemingly ethnocentric attitude of the host culture.

The language difficulties

The literature indicates that the language difficulties EAL learners encounter while writing their theses range from lexis and grammar, to clause structure (Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz, & Nunan, 1998; Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1997). In particular, a lack of vocabulary is the most common difficulty mentioned in these studies. Kirby et al. (1996) suggest that lack of vocabulary could influence the way learners approach studying in a foreign language. Their study shows that '[i]nefficient L2 word-recognition processes overload the limited-capacity working memory and this

impairs readers' capacity to use higher-order strategies for comprehension and learning' (p.144). This signifies that language ability is inextricably bound with cognitive performance and that their interrelation should be taken into account for more comprehensive understanding of the difficulties faced by EAL learners.

A number of studies compare the perceptions of difficulties between EAL learners and teaching staff (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Geake & Maingard, 1999; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000). For instance, Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006), employing individual in-depth interviews with supervisor/student pairs, examine their perceptions of difficulties in the writing of the discussion section of the thesis. They found that supervisors and students each have a different understanding of the major difficulties and the root cause of those difficulties with regard to the writing of this particular section. Elsewhere, Robertson et al (2000), using a questionnaire to survey undergraduate students' learning difficulties, contend that students and staff generally view issues in a similar way, but that their opinions on the causes of difficulties vary.

It is interesting, but perhaps not surprising, that in both studies, students tend to use language as a fundamental explanation of their difficulties, whether they are undergraduates or postgraduates. The fact that language is a potential barrier in virtually every aspect of an EAL learner's life is often underestimated and misinterpreted. However, it is essential to keep in mind that writing in a second language at postgraduate level is not an issue that can be explained away simply in terms of language. However, from a very basic sense, language acquisition requires much effort and time. As Kolln (2003) notes:

Nonnative speakers must spend a great deal of conscious effort on the uses of *be* [author's italic] in English, just as native English speakers studying a foreign language must do when confronted

with its equivalent (p.6).

This is just one small grammatical example. EAL postgraduate learners also have to master academic discourse, meaning ‘a kind of language with its own vocabulary, norms, sets of conventions, and modes of inquiry’ (Zamel, 1998a, p. 187). The idea of academic discourse as unified, fixed and being ‘easily identifiable entities’ (Zamel, 1998a, p. 189) is under criticism (e.g. see Zamel, 1998a). That is, in addition to the English language, EAL postgraduate learners have to appropriate a genre, which is no easy task.

However, linguistic competence is vital in mediating ‘the relations between host cultural contact and psychological and sociocultural difficulty’ (Yang, Noels, & Saumure, in press, p. 17). The psychological feeling of language incompetence which is characterised by Leki (1992) as ‘language shock’ (p.11) is perhaps more salient than actual language ability. Zamel (1998b) notes that:

While these [EAL] students acknowledged that they continue to experience difficulties, they have also voiced their concern that these struggles not be viewed as deficiencies, that their efforts be understood as serious attempts to grapple with these difficulties (p.255).

In fact, EAL learners’ desire for mutual communication and understanding has been reported (Lillis, 1999; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Zamel, 1998b). However, the psychological dimension of their voices and feelings such as stress, homesickness, and sense of isolation (Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000) are often excluded in discussing EAL learners’ writing difficulties, as if learners’ academic performance is independent from their inner feelings, attitudes and personal traits. This appears to be the result of a product-oriented approach which implicitly presumes EAL

learners' one-way assimilation into Western academy. In recent years, this approach and its underlying assumption has been criticized in the emergence of another approach which emphasizes reciprocal influences and learning opportunities for the learners from other cultures and the host country (Cadman, 2000; Canagarajah, 2002; Chryssochoou, 2004; Lee & Rice, in press; Morita, 2004; Strauss & Walton, 2005; Zamel, 1998b). This new approach emphasises that the challenges these learners face must be seen in the context of the environment in which they work.

Critical thinking

Apart from the language issue which has been mentioned, the most frequently criticised area of the EAL thesis is the [poor] quality of logical argument, coherent structure, and overall balance of the organisation of the text (Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz, & Nunan, 1998; Aspland, 1999; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1997; Dong, 1998). Sillitoe and Crosling (1999) explain that:

[E]ven though the [EAL] students may be writing in English and using terminology and phraseology which are familiar to Western readers, they may be applying organizational and writing patterns from their first language. When the students' writing is based in cultural and discourse conventions borrowed from their first language and culture, the writing can often have a considerably different structure and logic to that required by Western universities. Consequently, the resulting mismatch of understanding can result in a reader who is attuned to Western conventions experiencing, at best, a sense of strangeness or difference in the written work, at worst confusion and incomprehension (p.167).

This 'confusion and incomprehension' is, arguably, the source of the hotly debated assumption that East Asian learners lack critical thinking skills (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Littlewood, 2000; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Wilkinson & Kavan,

2003). It is indeed necessary for EAL learners to change their way of thinking to meet the demand of Western academy, and research shows that students generally recognise this need for change and adjustment (Cadman, 2000; Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Creighton, & Warnes, 2003). However, it is equally essential for the instructors to understand that this transitional process is often fraught and entails considerable struggle (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Shen, 1998). The two parties need to acknowledge the challenges so that a helpful starting point for mutual understanding and ‘reciprocal learning development’ (Cadman, 2000, p. 480) can ensue.

Drawing on Contrastive Rhetoric, Leki (1992) states:

The depiction of the English paragraph as a straight line has been equated with English as logical, and by inescapable implication (at least to those who value this version of logic), superior, while the written expressions of other cultures seem somehow twisted or scattered (p.89).

The tendency of associating rhetorical patterns with ‘innate *thought* [author’s italic] processes of other cultures’ (Leki, 1992, p. 89) is problematic. Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) offer a different view, one which transcends the ‘acquisition of the form’ (p.145):

We believe that learners have to be seen as more than processing devices that convert linguistic input into well-formed (or not so well-formed) outputs. They need to be understood as people, which in turn means we need to appreciate their human agency (p.145).

Understandably, what counts as critical in a Western context is inevitably determined by the Western perspective. In fact, the way in which [Western] critical thinking is developed and cultivated entails more than thinking ability. Bassham, Irwin, Nordone and Wallace (2005) made a list of 26 common barriers to critical thinking, with a ‘lack

of relevant background information' (p.11) being at the top of the list. Adamson (1993) also notes:

Critical thinking requires a large amount of subject-specific background knowledge and a high degree of acculturation into Western academic society (p.113).

EAL thesis writers have to ensure that their writing demonstrates a sound understanding of content knowledge and presents the argument in a way that is acceptable to Western academic norms. Furthermore, they are expected to maintain their unique voice instead of regurgitating the views of others. This leads to the next issue of balancing EAL authorship and accommodating to Western conventions.

Authorship and accommodation within EAL thesis writing

For all postgraduate students, it is crucial to understand what is expected by those who will examine their theses. According to Western academic conventions, one of the most distinctive requirements in composing a thesis is to embrace the authorship (Sillitoe & Crosling, 1999). Research into this topic suggests that establishing authorship and demonstrating the appropriateness of the academic conventions is a rhetorically challenging task (Allison, 2003). At this juncture, it is necessary to consider the related notion of 'voice' and its use in this study. The study finds Bowden's (1995) definition for 'voice' particularly useful:

Voice as a metaphor has to do with feeling-hearing-sensing a person behind the written words even if that person is just a persona created for a particular text or a certain reading (pp 97-98).

At any rate, no written words can ever exist without their writer. The terms used in the EAL writing literature to signify the presence of writer are, for instance, voice (Cadman, 2000; Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Strauss & Walton, 2005), authorship

(Strauss & Walton, 2005), authority (Allison, 2003), and identity (Cadman, 1997; Shen, 1998). The purpose here is to explore the tension in the process of reconciling having one's voice in one's writing and following the academic language that is conventionally acceptable to a Western audience. It is not the intention of this study to explore different definitions of 'voice'. Thus, while it is acknowledged that the above terms do not necessarily carry the same meaning, the study focuses only on their common implication: the writer behind the written words, based on Bowden's (1995) insight.

Sillitoe and Crosling (1999) point out:

[I]n thesis writing at the postgraduate level, the Western expectation is that students will express a sense of authority in their work and thus explicitly comment on, analyse and interpret information from other sources (p.168).

An understanding of this expectation is extremely important for EAL thesis writers. Coming from different epistemological and cultural backgrounds, many find themselves less than adequately prepared for the academic conventions practised by their host institutions. EAL writers must then swiftly learn not only to accommodate the academic conventions practised by the community to which they belong, but also to display convincingly in the written format their confidence of the knowledge to their readers. In other words, it is imperative for novice writers to balance 'between group identification and self-assertion' (Connor & Mauranen, 1999, p. 49), if they want to succeed in their work.

On the other hand, research by Strauss and Walton (2005) reports that in reality, EAL student writers' voices often 'are restrained or altered to suit the demands of supervisors and examiners' (p.52). They claim that supervisors 'perform a delicate

balancing act between allowing the voice of the student to be heard and at the same time maintaining an acceptable standard of academic language' (p.55). The same 'delicate balancing act' holds true for EAL thesis writers. Their task is to establish a convincing self-representation in their theses, without violating the existing academic norms. However, conforming to the unexamined conventions and practices could lead to EAL writers' 'self-denying' (Allison, 2003, p. 175), which is detrimental to constructing one's voice. They need, however, to demonstrate insider knowledge in a given academic community, if they are to be rewarded with good marks by an expert audience. As Johns (1997) notes:

In order to receive a good grade (or be published), writers often must work within the rules. Understanding these rules, even if they are to be broken, appears to be essential (p.68).

The inherent tension for EAL thesis writers in accommodating a new, Western discourse community is acknowledged in the literature (Allison, 2003; Cadman, 1997, , 2000; Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Johns, 1997; Kubota, 2002; Leki, 1992; Shen, 1998; Strauss & Walton, 2005). Cadman's (1997) study 'Thesis Writing for international students: a question of identity ?' is one of the few which investigates EAL writers' own perceptions of analytical writing. Taking the perspective of a learner as a whole person—'thinking, feeling and studying' (p.4), she examines the relationship between the EAL thesis writers and the English language in their theses. One excerpt from her Japanese participants is particularly pertinent to the 'delicate balancing act':

I got so easily a clear idea how to improve my draft. Then I began to put my own voice in my writing. I did not know, however, how to organize the writing with my opinion. It caused disorder in my draft. When I presented only information and other people's ideas, at least people could understand what was written, even though they could not understand what I was going to say about it. It is

like swimming with no breaths. I can swim effectively so long as I do not breathe. But once I take a breath, my swimming form will break down completely. In the same way, my writing broke down as soon as I put in my voice (p.10).

Such delineation foregrounds the dilemma facing EAL writers trying to compose an identity in English, which is a foreign way of self-expression. It also illustrates that it is not that EAL writers do not have their self-perceived identities or voices, but that they often struggle to convey this in their writing (Cadman, 1997; Hirvela & Belcher, 2001), which creates the impression that they do not have a voice.

Hirvela and Belcher (2001) challenge the common belief that EAL writers need to be taught to develop a voice; they argue that EAL writers are ‘not voiceless, particularly the mature students with a track record of L1 professional or academic success in writing’ (p.88). They argue that EAL writers’ transition from an already established L1 identity to an English identity, needs to be facilitated because ‘the transitions in identity are not smooth, and in fact, can cause considerable agony’ (p.88) to EAL writers. If Reagan (2005) is right in stating that bilingualism is ‘not issues of language and linguistics, but rather issues of power, domination, hegemony’ (p.8), then it is perfectly understandable why such transitions will not be easy. It is literally a complete reconstruction of another social identity (Reagan, 2005, p. 29).

The other way to conceptualise the tension in this situation is to consider how best the production of a thesis could satisfy the author, the EAL writer, while fulfilling the expectations of Western readers at the same time. Indeed, it would be unusual if the writer felt enthusiastic about a piece of written work that did not reflect his/her identity and creativity.

Through a longitudinal tracking of the rhetorical development of her EAL research

writers, Tardy (2005) reveals the close connection between rhetorical knowledge, the sense of authorship and the requirement of graduate study—knowledge construction.

She contends:

In the academic ranks of schooling, writing tasks move gradually from a focus on the transmission of knowledge to the transformation of knowledge. As a more complex writing task, knowledge-transforming requires writers to engage in the rhetorical act of persuading readers of their work's value, significance, and credibility (p.325).

In Tardy's study, both graduate participants, one Chinese, one Thai, reported having experienced the tension described earlier, but they 'managed to maintain a feeling of ownership over their texts' (p.336) after they slowly learnt how to convey their ideas in a persuasive manner in their writing. Her research indicates the importance of rhetorical knowledge in mediating the act of asserting authorship and accommodating academic conventions.

The rhetorical knowledge adapted in this study is situated within the notion of L2 advanced academic literacy explained in 2.2.1.2. Based on Tardy's findings, it seems, rhetorical knowledge potentially serves as a device to establish 'an authorial niche' (Tardy, 2005, p. 327) and to moderate the tension inherent in performing the 'delicate balancing act'. In a similar way, Hyland (2004) argues that:

The ability of writers to control the level of personality in their texts, claiming solidarity with readers, evaluating their material, and acknowledging alternative views, is now recognized as a key feature of successful academic writing (pp.133-134).

According to Hyland, a writer's ability to interact socially in academic writing, which he calls metadiscourse, plays the same crucial role as rhetorical knowledge in creating

‘persuasive and argumentative discourse’ (p.135). As EAL writers begin to focus not only on what to convey but also on how to convey it, especially in terms of self-presentation, to their readers, they begin the shift to the rhetorical or metadiscourse dimension and engage with their audience more convincingly and actively. Such skill and knowledge helps EAL writers to project themselves into their work more efficiently and hence might bring the authors a deeper sense of ownership over their writing.

However, as Tardy’s (2005) study demonstrates, rhetorical knowledge is often developed gradually over an extended period of time with the utilisation of various resources. Although increasingly, attention is being paid to and more investigation is being made into the linguistic difficulties faced by EAL postgraduate learners, it appears that some EAL learners still struggle with their thesis composition without receiving sufficient assistance from their universities. Given the constrained rhetorical repertoire employed in the composition of theses, unfortunately, EAL students do not tend to demonstrate a strong presence in their writing (Strauss & Walton, 2005).

2.2.2.2. Relationships

EAL learners and supervisors

The quality of a supervisory relationship is influential on the production of a thesis for all students. Supervisory problems are not limited to EAL students; their first language peers also experience difficulty in this regard (Geake & Maingard, 1999). The difference is that the EAL learners often have to contend with mismatched expectations largely due to cross-cultural factors (Geake & Maingard, 1999). Aspland’s (1999) observation may offer some explanation for the mismatch:

On entry, they [EAL learners] bring with them particular

orientations to learning and to university practices that are alien to the central constructs of Western academics and the hegemonic practices that permeate universities. As a result, each student is required to undergo a process of transformation that is fraught with dilemmas and contestations which are difficult to resolve, particularly in isolation (p.37).

Indeed, in order to succeed in their studies, the students will have to go through a radical change to cope with a new academic milieu. While EAL postgraduate learners are mostly aware of the need for change (Cadman, 2000; Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Creighton, & Warnes, 2003), they may not be immediately capable of conceptualising and internalising the ‘the practical, social and epistemological challenges involved in sharing a new research culture’ (Cadman, 2000, p. 482).

Belcher (1994) examined three supervisory relationships between EAL learners and their respective supervisors. She proposes an apprenticeship model of a working relationship, and emphasises that the mutual collaboration of the two parties could yield a more constructive outcome in terms of facilitating learners’ ‘growth and independence’ (p.31). Similarly, Aspland (1999) advocates a ‘both-ways’ (p.38) approach to supervision, in that each ‘supervisory partner’ (p.38) has a right to express his/her voice, regardless of the other’s position. In a supervisory relationship, supervisors can learn from students (Rountree & Laing, 1996, p. xiii) just as much as students can learn from supervisors. This emergent realisation in the literature signifies that the ‘dialogue’ (Cadman, 2000; Strauss, Walton, & Madsen, 2003) between EAL learners and teaching staff/the wider institution seems to better facilitate the process of EAL thesis writing.

Another cross-cultural supervisory issue has direct bearing on the production of EAL theses. Research into this area highlights the ‘professional and ethical’ (Knight, 1999, p.

97) concerns regarding the language and editing assistance that EAL writers may or may not receive from their supervisors (Knight, 1999; Strauss & Walton, 2005; Strauss, Walton, & Madsen, 2003). Here, the language problem is interwoven with the issue of student authorship, and whether or not it is the responsibility of supervisors to correct an EAL writer's language in a thesis. Supervisors obviously have more power to decide whether or not they offer this support (Allison, 2003). The complexities which initiate supervisors to do this, whether willingly or unwillingly, or not to do it, could be a mixture of professional, ethical and political concerns (Strauss, Walton, & Madsen, 2003).

The extent of the controversy of this issue is demonstrated by the following excerpts which represent quite different standpoints:

Vague feelings of disquiet and guilt plague students who do not feel in control of their own work. By giving targeted help to these students, they can be empowered to control their own education progress. Legitimate and justifiable language assistance can be one such crucial service. However, there are still supervisors who have reservations about such language services because they think the work is not the student's own (Nagata, 1999, p. 24).

If the supervisor assumes the responsibility [of language assistance], not only is he or she taking on a very onerous and time-consuming task, normally one well beyond that required with research students from English speaking backgrounds, but the supervisor may be guilty, at least in part, of writing the thesis for the students (Knight, 1999, pp. 97-98).

It is not surprising to note that the first opinion, which focuses on the empowerment of EAL thesis writers, comes from a Japanese academic who works in an English-medium university, although the second comment also makes a convincing point by emphasising the supervisor's professional role. Knight (1999) suggests that

one of the solutions to mitigate the tension would be to have discussion on the mutual expectations of the two parties at an early stage of supervision.

EAL learners and host institutions

Cooley and Lewkowicz (1997) challenge the assumption in the West that a 'student accepted for a research degree has the linguistic competence to produce a thesis without any specific instruction in writing' (p.113), for such an assumption does not reflect the fact that to produce a successful thesis within an academic discipline requires more than just language skills. Achieving a required level in a language test such as IELTS [International English Language Testing System] does not mean that Western academic conventions are readily transferred to an EAL writer. EAL learners therefore need a 'systematic support programme' (Farquhar, 1999, p. 119) to assist their thesis writing. As previously discussed, there is little evaluation in the literature of the adequacy of academic support for EAL thesis writers.

2.2.2.3. Conclusion

In order to overcome cognitive, linguistic and cultural challenges, it is the responsibility of EAL postgraduate learners to find ways to succeed in their studies. However, one of the problems seems to be the gap relating to the understanding of learning difficulties between EAL learners and their host institutions. As the linguistic and cultural clashes occur in both learners and the teaching faculty (Zamel, 1998b), it requires two-way work to bridge the gap (Cadman, 2000; Canagarajah, 2002; Lillis, 1999; Morita, 2004).

Accordingly, the encounter between Western institutions and EAL postgraduate learners should be viewed as providing reciprocal opportunities for the exchange of

knowledge. Canagarajah (2002) states:

Academic literacy should adopt a bilateral process—in other words, not only should students be made to appreciate academic discourses but the academic community should accommodate alternate discourse (p.14).

For the mutual encounter to be meaningful, it is argued that EAL learners' 'authentic voices' (Braine, 2002, p. 65), including their sense of agency within this encounter, need to be highlighted. Morita (2004) contends that 'L2 research has not reflected learners' voices' (p.575). Thus, adopting an academic literacies model for EAL thesis writing may be useful in investigating their voices.

2.3 Summary

This review began with a brief outline of the cultural and educational background shared by the participants in the study. There appears to be a parallel relationship between the Western concept of knowledge consuming and transformation, and Confucius's stages of learning. It was concluded that critical thinking may not be entirely foreign to Chinese learners.

The discussion then shifted to the Western context in which the participants' thesis writing takes place. Concepts of academic literacies as socially situated practices and advanced academic literacy were provided; three levels of writing were discussed in an attempt to better address the complexities embedded in the EAL thesis writing process.

Finally, the actual difficulties encountered by EAL learners were reported, including the sociocultural impact, language challenges, critical thinking, tensions of balancing authorship and accommodating Western norms and the EAL learners' relationships

with supervisors and host institutions. An emergent trend amongst some research emphasises that an effort needs to be made to recognise the mutual learning processes between EAL learners and their host institutions.

2.4 Research gaps

Based on the review, there are two significant gaps in the literature which the current study seeks to bridge:

1. There are few investigations that focus on Mandarin-speaking Masters students' thesis writing experiences in New Zealand and which, instead of problem-identification, take an academic literacies approach to exploring the situations of these learners. The contextualised academic literacies approach is considered by the researcher to be more appropriate for discussing issues of EAL thesis writing.
2. Within the framework of an academic literacies approach, the research then places the Mandarin-speaking Masters students' agency at the centre of study. It attempts to uncover their voices and perceptions, not from an educational perspective, but from a learners-as-humans perspective (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). As Lea (2004) remarks, research into the area of academic literacies 'has been practitioner-based and practitioner-led' (p.742), which represents a one-way pedagogical stance towards academic literacy in general. It is argued that learners' first-hand accounts into their own academic process will provide complementary and, therefore, fruitful implications for pedagogical concerns.

The following section will delineate the methodology which is designed to meet the aim of highlighting the voices of EAL learners.

3 Methodology

This chapter first explains the research paradigm in the study, followed by ethical considerations. Then the design of methods will be presented.

3.1 The theoretical perspective: interpretivist

Fundamentally, this qualitative research is based on the interpretivist paradigm while technically it utilises a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data. The researcher's personal epistemology is allied with the interpretivist stance which 'assumes a relativist ontology where reality is viewed in terms of multiple constructions'(Green, 2002, p. 6). Participants in this study brought with them what they had inherited from their own countries and thus after relocation in New Zealand, the realities they lived in were somewhat multiple. Accordingly, this explorative study seeks to contextualise the intercultural academic experiences of the participants and to investigate their experiences.

3.2 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was gained from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK) on June 13, 2006. All participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary. Interviewees were assured that their identities would be protected. A copy of the consent form (Appendix A) and a copy of the information sheet (Appendix B) are attached.

3.3 Mixed methods design

This study employed two methods as primary devices for data collection: surveys (Appendix C) and follow-up interviews. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) support the use of a mixed model design, noting that such designs ‘incorporate techniques from both the quantitative and qualitative research traditions yet combine them in unique ways to answer research questions that could not be answered in any other way’(p.x).

The main goal of the survey was to obtain an overview of the target participants’ perceptions of their learning difficulties and, based on that, identify the important issues to be further explored in the interviews. Hence, the in-depth interviews aimed to contextualise the difficulties facing participants, so that a clearer picture of their experiences and perceptions could be captured.

In the past, a few qualitative studies which explored learning or writing issues faced by advanced L2 speakers also used the combination of survey and follow-up interviews (e.g. Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004; Dong, 1998; Okamura, 2006). Neuman (2003) characterises the combination of quantitative and qualitative devices as the ‘triangulation of method’ (p.193), which increases the validity of the research to some extent. The significance of ‘triangulation of method’ (Neuman, 2003, p.193) lies in employing various methods to collect data, which then allow the researcher to have a ‘broader and more secure understanding of the issue’(Maxwell, 2005, pp. 93-94).

The remainder of this section will describe various aspects of the design, including the survey and interview.

3.3.1 The survey

The purpose of the survey was threefold. As noted above, it explored the variability of participants' perceptions of their learning difficulties; it also highlighted significant issues that could be investigated later during the interviews. In addition, it functioned as an invitation to students from different universities to participate in the interviews. Contacts with international centres, student associations and postgraduate offices at 8 universities were made to seek their help in distributing the survey. Without the surveys, which were sent via email to universities throughout New Zealand, it would have been difficult to directly recruit participants from regions other than Auckland, where the researcher currently studies.

The statements (Appendix C) in the survey covered the difficulties frequently identified in the literature and the multiple choice answers suggested were drawn from both the literature and the experiences of the researcher. The survey sought to verify whether those areas identified in the literature coincided with the participants' experiences, and if so, to what degree. For instance, to what extent does a participant think s/he has difficulty in understanding thesis requirements in her/his discipline? What does s/he do to tackle the difficulty? Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each statement on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Each question also provided an opportunity for participants to comment, either in Mandarin or in English, and to offer alternatives to those provided. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to provide demographic and academic information. Lastly, they were invited to share their experiences in greater depth, in the form of an interview.

3.3.2 The interviews

The interviews were based on the issues revealed in the surveys and attempted to address the complexities that participants encountered. Before conducting an interview, the researcher went through the survey completed by the interviewee, and made a question list based on it. Generally, the interviewees were invited to reflect on their experiences in the following areas:

1. Learning difficulties and the development of academic English proficiency.
2. Supervision and its impact on thesis writing.
3. The perceptions of voice, autonomy and knowledge construction in the writing of the thesis.

Attention was also paid to non-verbal signs and the flow of conversation so that ideas and issues which were unique to that particular interviewee were allowed to emerge. Interviews were conducted in the participants' mother tongue for about 45 minutes to one hour in a casual setting e.g. cafes or in their rooms. All the interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the interviewees.

After the interview, the researcher translated the recordings from Mandarin into English. For the purpose of verification, a copy of the transcript (by email) and tape (by post) of the interview was sent to interviewees within ten days. The researcher highlighted areas in the transcripts which were not clear and asked the respective participants to provide clarification. All interviewees were informed that they could

delete, add or modify the English translations in the transcripts. They were all very supportive in offering their clarifications.

3.3.3 Transcription and translation concerns

It is acknowledged that when raw data are translated from the source language to the target language, the researcher has already gone through certain interpretations (Maxwell, 2005). As a native speaker, naturally the researcher is fluent in Mandarin. On the other hand, although she has translated a number of books from English to Mandarin in Taiwan, this is the first time that she has translated this amount of data from Mandarin to English. The following measures were employed to ensure that the quality of translation was, to the best of her knowledge, ‘accurate and meaningful’ (Maxwell, 2005, p. 111):

- As stated, each interviewee was sent a copy of the translation for verification. Several amendments were provided directly by participants in English when they modified or added to the transcripts.
- During transcription and translation, an attempt was made to capture the subtleties of interaction, and areas which aroused emotions were noted.
- While all quotes are presented in English in the report, participants’ words in Mandarin would be added whenever necessary to signal that it was difficult to find equivalent words or phrases in English.

3.3.4 Researcher's role

Maxwell (2005) states explicitly that '[Y]ou *are* [author's italic] the research instrument in a qualitative study, and your eyes and ears are the tools you use to make sense of what is going on' (p.79). The researcher's insider knowledge and experiences will therefore inevitably influence the way data are interpreted.

The fact that the researcher shared the participants' language, culture and status as a Masters student engaged in writing a thesis, proved to be advantageous in the interviews. These were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere where participants could freely express their opinions without linguistic constraint. There are a number of advanced L2 learners studies where the researcher and the participants share the same cultural and linguistic background (e.g. Abe, 2001; Morita, 2004; Okamura, 2006; Phusawisot, 2003; Riazi, 1997).

Nevertheless, in spite of her genuine interest in listening to participants' voices, the researcher was careful not to influence their answers. She was conscious that one of the most serious problems facing the insider as a researcher is that of bias. This is a dilemma facing any qualitative researcher who holds an insider position in relation to the researched. Obviously empathy could be a catalyst for gaining trust and elaboration from participants; on the other hand, it might also significantly contribute to bias in terms of the objectivity and thus the validity of the research results.

3.3.5 Criteria for selecting participants

The criteria for the selection of participants are set out below:

1. Their first language is Mandarin.
2. They have been educated in Mandarin to Bachelor degree level in their home countries.
3. They are/were either full-time or part-time postgraduate students, enrolled on a Master's degree with a thesis or dissertation component at a New Zealand university.
4. They are currently completing a thesis or dissertation or did not complete their Masters studies before March 2004.
5. They have been living in New Zealand for *less* than 5 years.

Basically, the participants are characterised by their linguistic and Confucian cultural backgrounds, and are relatively new to the New Zealand educational system. Seven respondents who answered the survey indicated that they had lived in New Zealand for more than 5 years, and their data was thus not utilised. However, it was interesting to note that these learners experienced far fewer difficulties in managing their academic work. A similar observation was also made by Abe (2001) and Phusawisot (2003). Phusawisot (2003) states that 'the length of stay made important differences in participants' perspectives on their disciplinary learning' (p.29). Therefore, the fifth variable is essential in terms of their acculturation into host countries, and in turn, is crucial to their academic experiences. In the literature concerning EAL studies, participants' length of residence in their host countries was not always clearly defined. As part-time students must generally finish the programme within 5 years, target participants in the current study were confined to those Masters students who have lived in New Zealand for less than 5 years.

3.3.6 Data collection

The period of data collection lasted for two months. The respondents who participated in the research by filling out the surveys represented five universities in New Zealand.

Of the 51 returned surveys, 14 could not be used in the study. This was because 7 respondents, as noted previously, had lived in New Zealand for more than 5 years; 1 respondent had completed her Bachelor's degree in Singapore where English is the medium of instruction; and 6 respondents at that point did not have thesis writing experience.

Of the 37 respondents, 6 Masters students from two universities, one in the South Island and one in the North Island, indicated their availability for an interview.

3.3.7 Data analysis

As an academic apprentice in this Western research milieu, the researcher first went through two interview transcriptions under the guidance of her supervisor. During these sessions, she learned to identify significant themes through actual examples. She also learned to develop an eye for the interrelations between various themes and was able to link those themes into coherent structures. She then applied what she had learned to the six transcriptions, as well as to the survey findings. The interpretivist perspective was borne in her mind when making interpretations from the data. For instance, participants as international students, or as adults who come from Confucius cultural background were expressing particular aspects of their experiences thus construct similar yet unique individual realities.

Chapters 4 and 5 will report on the findings of the surveys and the interviews respectively.

4 Report of Survey Findings

This chapter reports on the results of each of the ten statements put to the participants in the survey. It then highlights key findings in a summary.

4.1 Introduction

The survey was completed by 37 participants from five universities, who had an average age of 29.9 years. Thirty five of these participants came from China, while two were Taiwanese. Only one had been in New Zealand for less than a year; all the others had lived in the country for between one and five years. They represented a number of disciplines, as shown in the table below:

Table 1

Overview of participants' disciplines	
Disciplines	No. of participants
Health	1
Management	1
Creative Arts	1
Science	3
Applied Humanities/Arts	7
Engineering	10
Business	13
Not available	1

The next section will report on the findings generated by the responses to these statements, including the strength of each indication according to a Likert scale, The solutions participants utilised to overcome their learning difficulties and their

comments will also be reported.

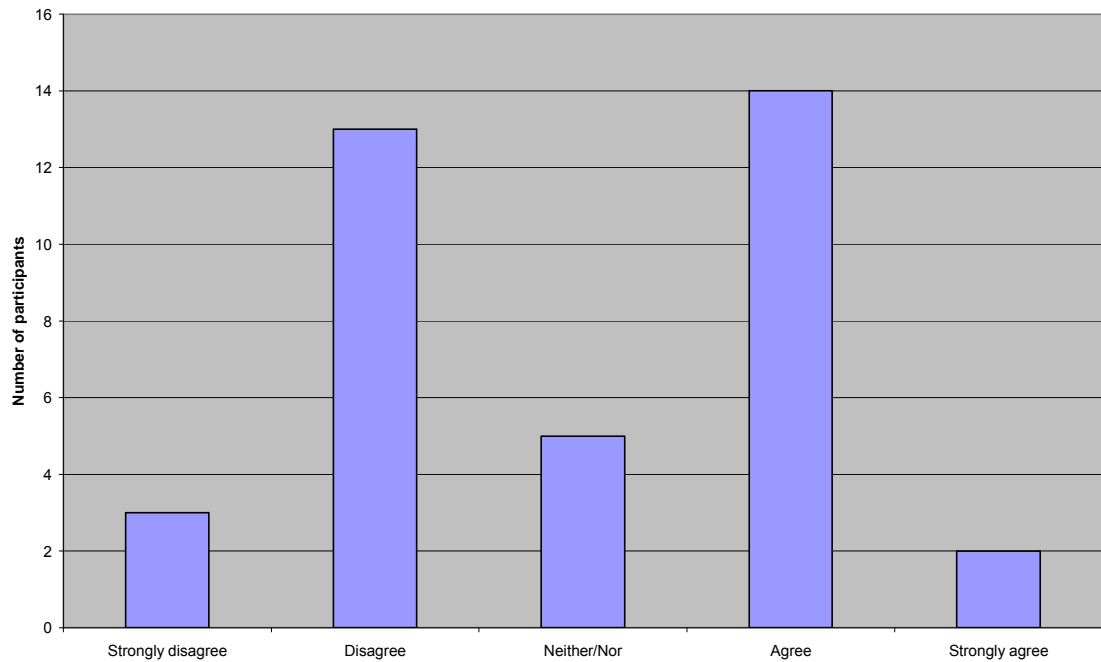
4.2 Results of each statement

4.2.1 Understanding the requirements of a thesis

In the first statement, participants were asked whether they experienced difficulties in understanding the requirements of thesis or dissertation writing and, if so to what degree. The statement is presented in italics below.

I experience difficulty in understanding the requirements of thesis/dissertation writing in my discipline, e.g. the structure and rhetorical demands or the function and characteristic in each section of thesis/dissertation.

Figure 1



Sixteen participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, signifying that

43.2% of the sample had trouble in understanding the thesis genre of their disciplines. On the other hand, there were sixteen participants who indicated that they did not encounter this difficulty. As an understanding of how important it is for EAL students to master academic genres is growing among academic staff, it is possible that universities are increasingly offering workshops to assist students in this regard.

They were then asked to comment on how they overcame the difficulties they faced by ticking, where applicable, the choices provided:

Table 2

Solutions	Frequency
I read published guides and handbook on thesis/dissertation writing	26
I ask my supervisor for help	25
I discuss issues with my peers	21
I read extensively in my discipline area	16
I access the student learning centre/support	13
I do not need help in this regard	4
Other	2

Both participants who ticked ‘Other’ indicated that they learned from other students’ theses.

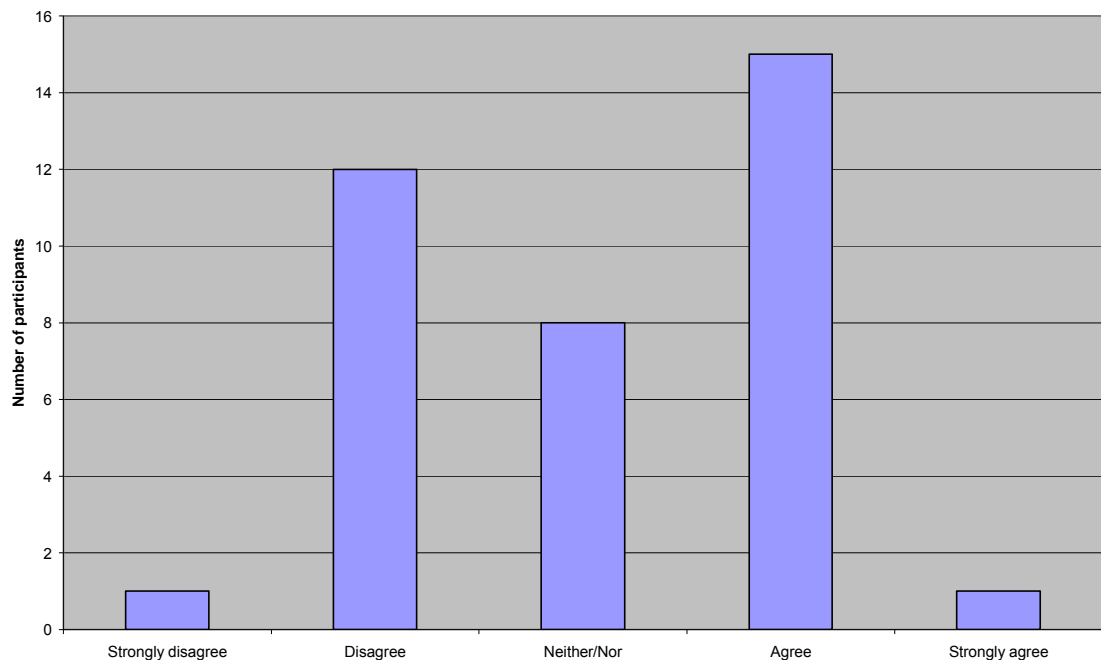
It appears that the most popular strategies employed by the participants were self-study (published books, readings of one’s discipline and others’ theses) and social resources (assistance from supervisors, peers and student learning support).

4.2.2 Insufficient English to cope with reading and writing

Statement 2 asked participants to evaluate their own English in coping with the reading and writing demands when they worked on their theses.

I have insufficient English to cope with the reading and writing demands of completing a thesis/dissertation.

Figure 2



Overall, 43.2 % of respondents indicated that they felt their command of English was not sufficient for the requirements of a thesis. About 35.1% of them disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. It is possible that at least some of those students who were satisfied with their command of English were working in discipline areas such as engineering where the language demands are not always as extensive as they are in, for example, Arts or Applied Humanities.

The ways in which they sought to improve their English are listed below:

Table 3

Solutions	Frequency
I ask my supervisor for assistance	20
I read extensively in my discipline area	20
I seek the help of friends who are native speakers	16
I access the student learning centre/support	13
I study published books with respect to improving vocabulary, grammar	10
I read articles with a focus on mastering English speakers' language use	6
Other	3
I do not need help in this regard	2

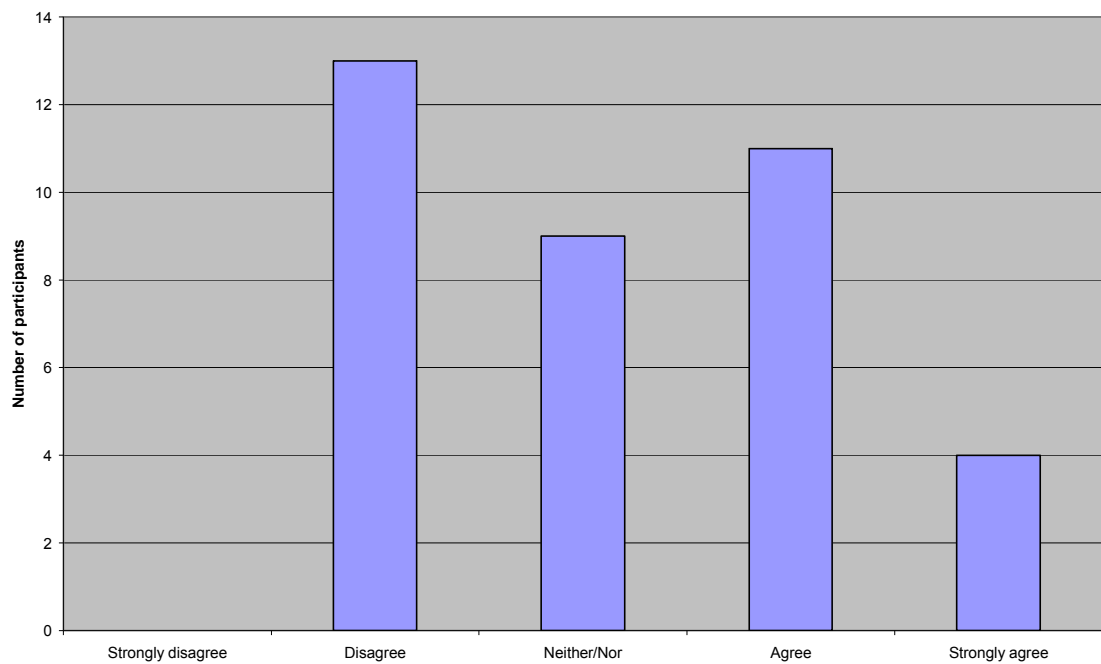
Participants also indicated that they asked for help in revising their drafts from staff at the learning centres and from proofreaders. One student said that a course aimed at assisting postgraduate students before enrolling on the Masters programme proved very useful. Overall, students attempted to help themselves by reading widely within the discipline. Seeking assistance from supervisors and friends was also common, and was interestingly more common than approaching student services.

4.2.3 Structuring of thesis

This statement asked participants to indicate the extent to which they had trouble structuring their writing to meet the demands of Western academic thinking.

I have trouble structuring my writing to meet the demands of Western academic thinking.

Figure 3



40.5% of participants had difficulties in structuring their theses, which is slightly more than those who disagreed (35.1%) with the statement. 24.3% of them neither agreed nor disagreed.

The solutions participants utilised were:

Table 4

Solutions	Frequency
I discuss with my supervisor	22
I read extensively in my discipline area and pay attention to the overall structure of the article	18
I look at published guides and handbooks on structuring coherent, logical writing	17
I seek the help of friends who are native speakers	13
I access the student learning centre/support	12
I ask for feedback from my peers	11
I do not need help in this regard	3
Other	1

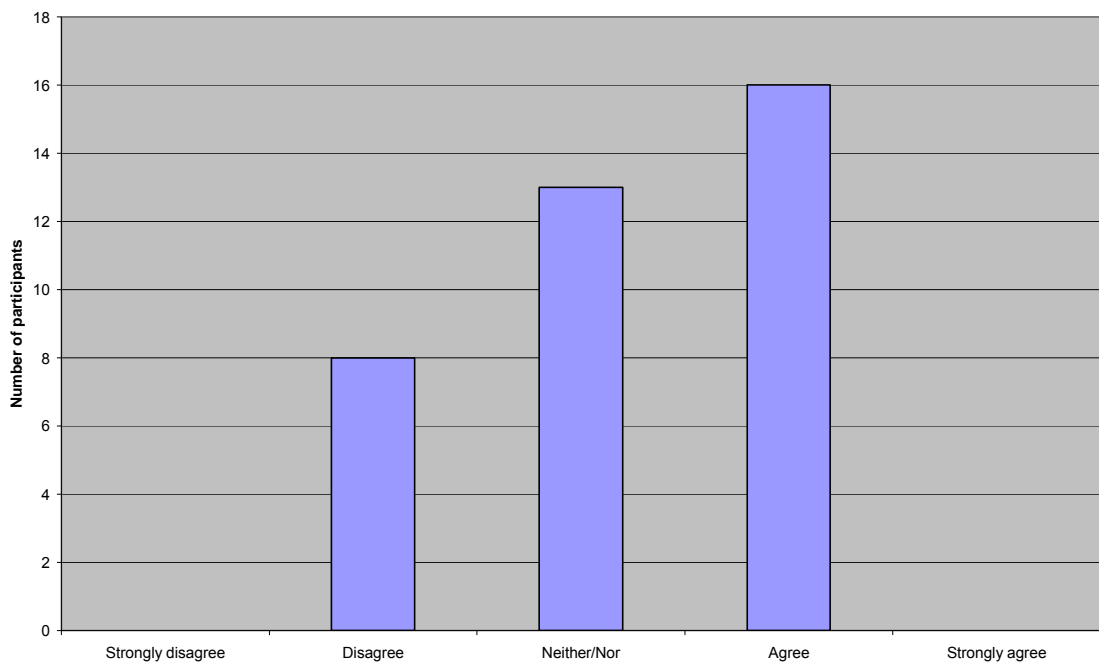
Table 4 shows that supervisors provided the most important assistance in structuring their theses. Reading disciplinary articles again proved to be very useful. Studying published guides and handbooks was the third most popular strategy utilised. One participant commented that reading other students' theses was helpful in gaining structural ideas.

4.2.4 Western critical thinking

In this statement, participants were asked whether or not they had difficulty in understanding the Western notion of critical thinking.

It is not easy for me to grasp the Western notion of critical thinking.

Figure 4



43.2% of participants agreed that they had this difficulty, while 21.6 % of them disagreed. There were 13 participants who remained neutral, this is the highest percentage in this category in all the statements.

Their methods for seeking understanding were reported as follows:

Table 5

Solutions	Frequency
I read extensively in my discipline area	24
I seek advice from my supervisor	20
I discuss this with my peers	17
I read published guides and handbooks on Western critical thinking	15
I access the student learning centre/support	11
I do not need help in this regard	5
Other	2

Extensive reading of disciplinary articles and seeking supervisors' guidance were the two most popular solutions, followed by engaging with peers and studying handbooks. One participant, who indicated 'other', noted that s/he did not know where to seek help.

4.2.5 The understanding of the supervisor

Statement 5 sought to investigate participants' perceptions of the empathy supervisors had for the challenges they faced.

I feel that my supervisor has little understanding of the difficulties I face in writing my thesis/dissertation.

Figure 5

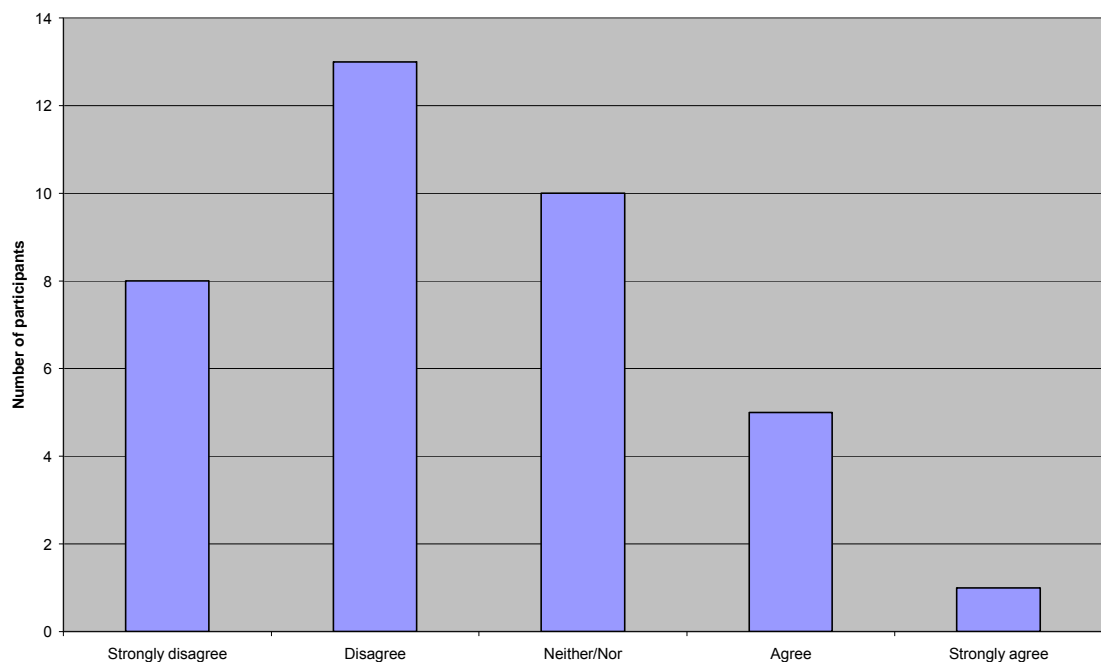


Figure 5 shows that well over half of the whole sample had supervisors who were sympathetic about the difficulties their students faced. Only 16.2% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. This might imply that most of the participants had relatively smooth supervisory relationships.

Participants were asked to indicate what they did if this was an issue for them:

Table 6

Solutions	Frequency
I speak to my supervisor	22
I do not have a problem in this regard	12
Other	3

One participant mentioned that although the supervisor did understand the difficulties, s/he was too busy to offer help in finding material. Another participant noted that the supervisor understood the difficulties and suggested that the participant keep practising writing to overcome this difficulty.

One significant finding is that participants would talk to their supervisors if they had this problem.

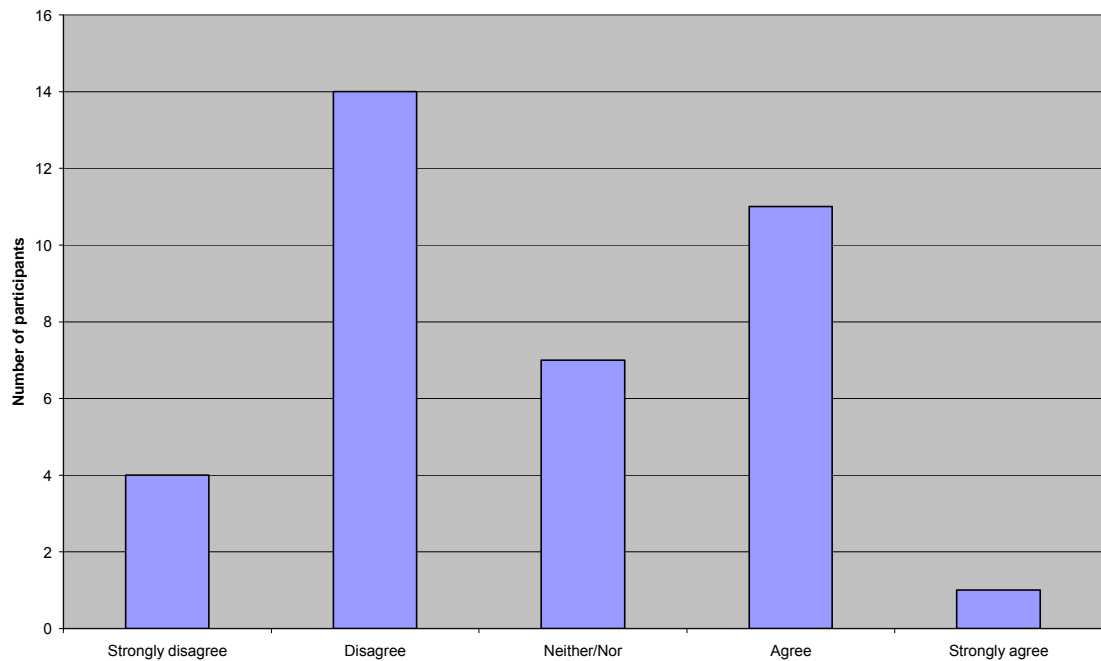
There appeared to be a contradiction between the results of Figure 5 and those of Table 6. According to Table 6, only 12 (32.4%) participants indicated that they did not have a problem in this regard, whereas Figure 5 indicated that more than 50% of participants had supervisors who understood their difficulties. It is possible that while the majority of participants were satisfied, there could have been minor issues that required discussion.

4.2.6 Supervision time

This statement examined the extent to which participants were satisfied with the supervision time they had received.

I receive an inadequate amount of time from my supervisor.

Figure 6



Of 37 participants, 18 were satisfied with the supervision time they had received, whereas 12 of them perceived their supervision time as inadequate. 7 participants' response was neutral.

They were then asked to provide the amount of supervision time they thought they needed. Four people did not offer an answer. Out of the four, two indicated 'Disagree' with the statement that they received inadequate supervision, and the other

two indicated 'Neither agree nor disagree'.

The average supervisory time participants felt they needed was 6.19 hours per month, excluding the maximum and minimum answers for reasons recorded below.

The longest supervision time indicated was 32 hours; the participant's answer to this statement was, surprisingly, 'Disagree', signifying s/he received at least 32 hours of supervision per month. Given the nature of the supervision and the average time needed by the majority of the participants, 32 hours per month did not seem to be a sensible answer. One explanation might be that the participant gave the calculation on a semester rather than a monthly basis. Another could be that the participant's understanding of supervision time included the supervisors' reading of drafts, whereas this question was aimed at face-to-face contact.

In contrast, one participant indicated that less than an hour per month was necessary. After the researcher emailed this participant for clarification, the participant explained that his supervisor went overseas for conferences quite frequently. The participant had also spent two months back in China and as a result, he did not meet his supervisor for about 6 months. He estimated that the actual time he met his supervisor was less than one hour per month. Nevertheless, he considered that he had had sufficient supervision.

As can be seen, the question asked participants to give an indication of the supervision time they perceived they needed. However, participants may have provided their answers based on speculation as to the time supervisors spent on their work, including meetings or the time they actually spent in face-to-face meetings.

Another point to be considered is the perceived satisfaction indicated by participants. What counts as sufficient or inadequate supervision depends largely on an individual's

idiosyncratic learning style, self-management and therefore different degrees of needs. The supervision time that participants thought they needed and their satisfaction as to what they received varied greatly. For instance, one participant who disagreed with the statement indicated s/he needed 3 hours of supervision whereas another, who also disagreed with the statement, needed 10 hours. It seems that less time for supervision was not necessarily perceived as inadequate; equally sufficient supervision was not always measured by time spent in the supervision meetings.

The solutions which participants sought were:

Table 7

Solutions	Frequency
I speak to my supervisor	15
I do not have a problem in this regard	11
I speak to other staff members	7
I access the student learning centre/support	4
Other	3
I talk to people who are in authority, e.g. a Dean	1

Most participants would communicate with their supervisors if they encountered this issue. There was only one who would speak to a higher authority while another participant noted that s/he did not take any action to resolve this problem. Additionally, one participant commented that it was the quality of the supervision rather than the time allocated that she was not satisfied with.

In conclusion, it appears that the number of hours of supervision is not particularly relevant in measuring participants' satisfaction with supervision. .

4.2.7 Study load and time management

Statement 7 sought to examine participants' perceptions of their study load and whether or not they had time to improve their English.

I do not have enough time to improve my English while writing my thesis/dissertation.

Figure 7

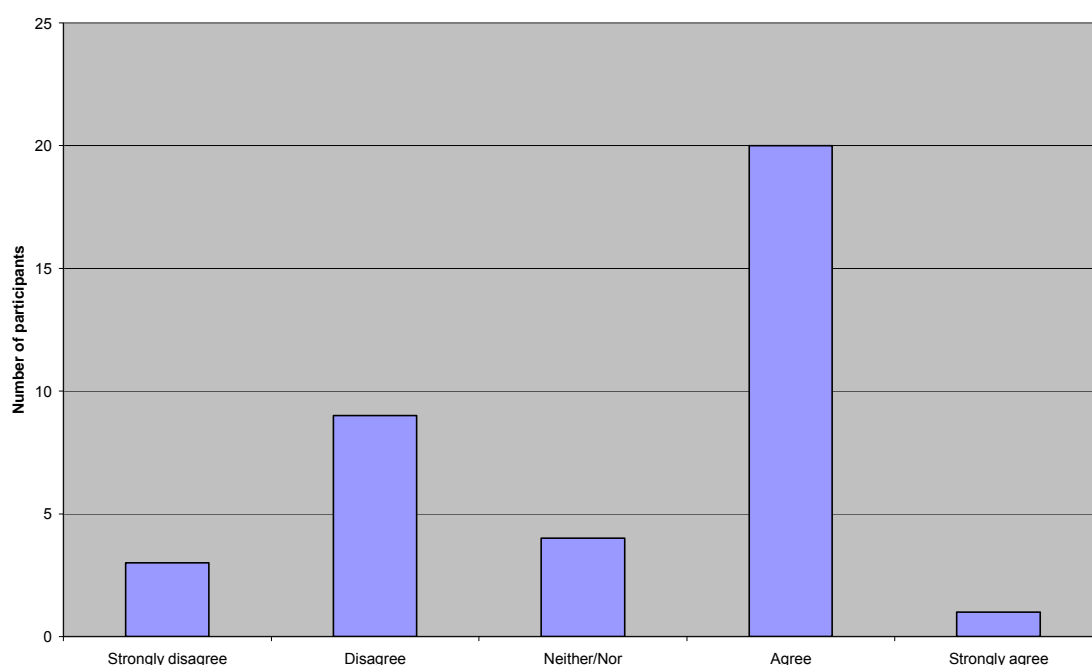


Figure 7 shows that 56.7% of participants felt that they had insufficient time to improve their English in addition to developing the language of their theses, signifying that the majority of them might experience stress from study load. Nevertheless, 32.4% indicated disagreement with the statement. Again it is possible that the linguistic demands made of students differed from one discipline to another.

In order to develop their proficiency of English, they employed the following

strategies:

Table 8

Solutions	Frequency
I work on my own time management	25
I talk to my peers	15
I seek advice from the student learning centre/support	13
I do not have a problem in this regard	3
Other	5

One respondent commented that her/his English had improved as a result of writing a thesis. Another noted that s/he improved her/his research English by reading widely and practising writing. This means that participants might not have extra time to improve their own English apart from the time spent on reading articles and writing the thesis.

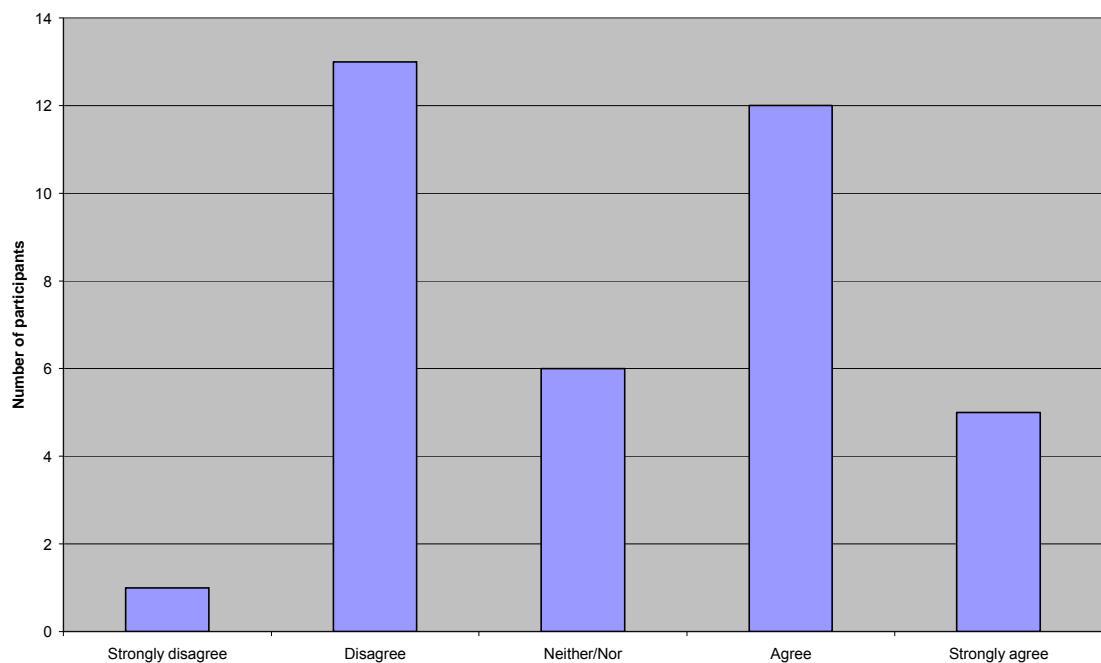
Originally the question was to investigate whether or not participants would need to spend extra time to improve their own English and therefore help their writing in the theses. The result of this question indicated that their ability to write in English was probably enhanced by the constant reading and writing demanded by their studies. Table 8 and the commentaries also show that time management was very critical for them. Some of their time management problems might have arisen because they had to seek external assistance for their writing, for instance, by approaching student services, asking for help from friends or native speakers or hiring proofreaders.

4.2.8 Self-directedness and efficacy

Statement 8 examined the extent to which participants' learning, including thesis writing, was self-managed.

It is difficult for me to study on my own without a lot of guidance.

Figure 8



According to Figure 8, 45.9 % of participants agreed that they needed a great deal of external guidance in undertaking their work, but more than 50% felt that they did not need this guidance.

Participants were asked to explain how they sought guidance:

Table 9

Solutions	Frequency
I exchange ideas with peers	27
I talk to my supervisor	25
I seek assistance from the student learning centre/support	14
I do not have a problem in this regard	5
Other	2

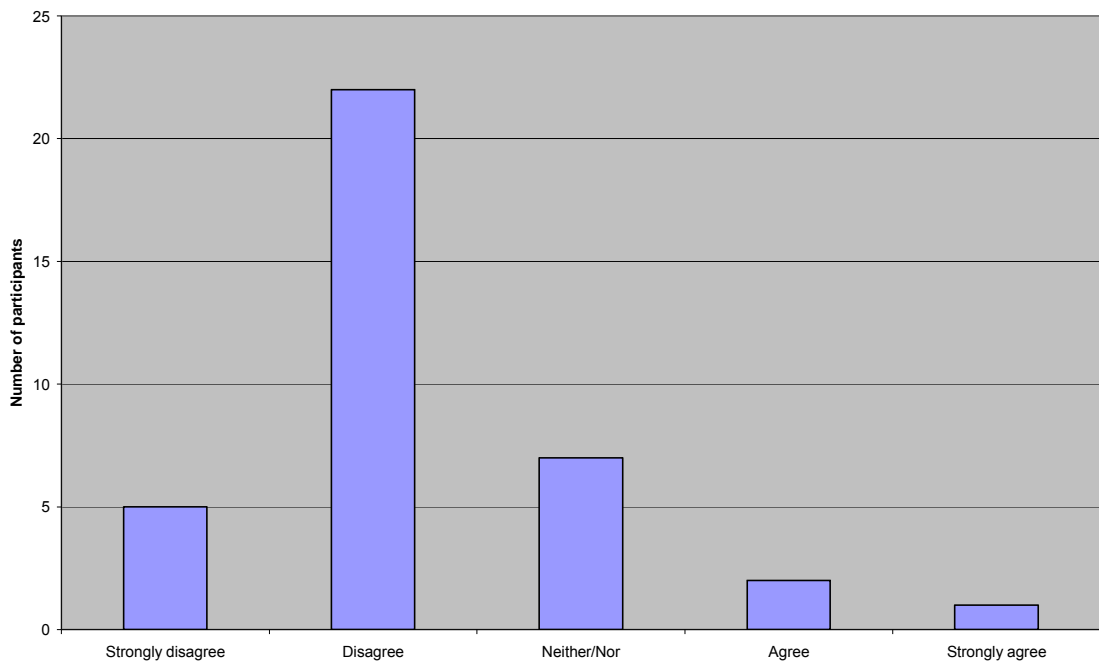
As Table 9 shows, the most frequently consulted people were peers, particularly those who had experience of thesis writing, and supervisors. In addition, other resources such as the library or the Internet were considered informative too. It appears that most participants were active in seeking external assistance to ensure they had enough guidance for thesis writing.

4.2.9 Autonomy in the supervisory relationship

This statement asked participants to evaluate the autonomy they had when working with their supervisors.

I feel that I am not allowed sufficient autonomy in doing my work the way I want.

Figure 9



This was the area that proved to be the least problematic for the majority of participants. As shown in Figure 9, only three participants felt that their autonomy was compromised. 27 out of 37 people felt they enjoyed autonomy in doing the work.

Participants indicated their situations as follows:

Table 10

Solutions	Frequency
I do not have a problem in this regard	17
I negotiate with my supervisor	15
I discuss the issue with peers and ask their advice	8
I seek advice from the student learning centre/support	4
Other	0

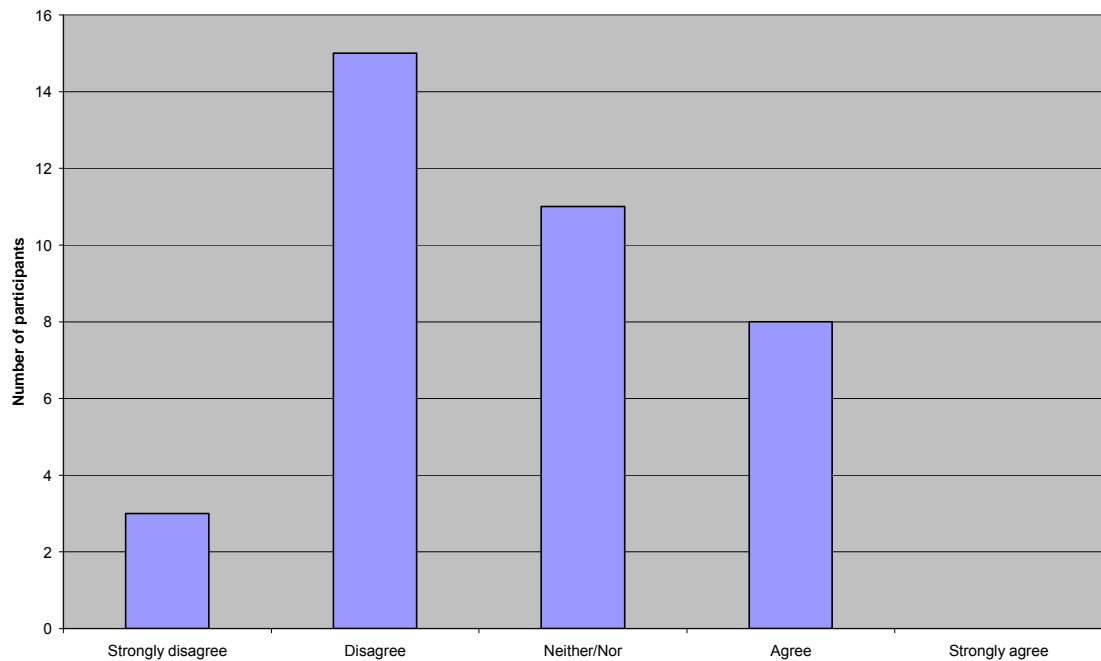
In Table 10, 17 participants stated that they did not have this problem at all. Those who had this issue mostly negotiated with their supervisors.

4.2.10 Adjustment to host universities

In this statement, participants were asked to evaluate the extent to which they had adjusted to their host universities.

Overall, I find it difficult to adjust to the host educational institution.

Figure 10



18 participants disagreed that they had difficulties in adjusting to their host universities. However, Figure 10 also indicates that more than half of the participants did not give a positive answer to this statement.

Participants' responses to the solutions were:

Table 11

Solutions	Frequency
I share my experiences with my peers	20
I speak to my supervisor	14
I do not have a problem in this regard	11
I talk to my parents/other family members	9
Other	2

The support from peers was most important. One participant, commenting in Mandarin, stated that some of her peers graduated with good grades and that her postgraduate study was a learning process during which she slowly adjusted to the new environment. In addition, talking to supervisors was helpful for some participants, implying that the supervisor's role may incorporate more than academic expertise.

4.2.11 Open comments

After indicating answers for the ten statements, participants were invited to raise any other issues that related to thesis writing and which had not been covered in the survey.

One suggestion stated that thesis supporting workshops would be more useful if they were held before students started writing their theses. This suggestion was echoed by another participant, who mentioned that she had attended a workshop before the commencement of her programme, and thought it had been useful.

Lastly, one participant who delayed her thesis mentioned that her difficulty was not entirely language related. She felt that her supervisor had not provided sufficient assistance in recruiting participants for her research, despite his promise to do so.

4.3 Summary of survey findings

According to the overall indications on the Likert scale, around 40% of the participants experienced various difficulties in the areas of English language, genre knowledge of the thesis, structuring of their writings and adjusting to Western critical thinking (See Figures 1,2,3 and 4). To solve these dilemmas, most consulted with supervisors, read extensively and practised writing. In addition, published guides or handbooks on the genre and structure of theses were also identified as being useful resources.

As far as supervision is concerned, it seems that generally supervisors were sympathetic towards participants' difficulties. However, supervisors were often busy and this could affect their availability for participants and sometimes resulted in insufficient supervision. Additionally, supervision time was not the only factor influencing participants' satisfaction with their supervision as it often related more with the quality, rather than the quantity of supervision. The answers displayed in Tables 2 to 10 strongly indicate that supervisors played a crucial role in providing participants with academic guidance and sometimes emotional support. It therefore follows that the supervisory relationship has a great effect on students' learning and thesis production.

The extent to which participants were self-directed in their studies was indicated by questions 7, 8 and 9. Exchanging ideas with peers and guidance from supervisors were the main sources of information and support. Although participants felt pressured by deadlines, they did enjoy a large extent of autonomy in their work.

Less than one third of the sample indicated that they did not have problems adjusting

to host institutions and that peers and supervisors provided most of the support in this regard.

5 Report of Interview Findings

This section will report interview findings based on the four categories that emerged from the analysis: language issues, supervision, university support and personal milestones.

5.1 Introduction

There was an even number of male and female interviewees with an average age of 30. All six interviewees were full-time Masters students and three of them hold New Zealand residency. At the time of the interview, three had completed their Masters studies, one was waiting for her results and two were still working on their theses.

At the outset of their studies, the interviewees encountered a new educational environment that was different from that of their own culture. The initial difficulty they experienced was a feeling of shock or estrangement, at worse, disorientedness. One of them described this by saying ‘I felt as if I was on an alien planet when I sat in the very first class, having no idea what was going on. It was a terrifying feeling, you know?’

It was evident from the interviews that a cross-cultural thread was woven literally into every aspect of their lives in this new land. It permeated their academic study, namely, language, writing, conception of knowledge and the supervision. While initially they experienced varying degrees of stress during the phase of orientation to a new culture and educational system, over time they generally managed to overcome those challenges as their English proficiency and familiarity with the Western academic

milieu increased.

5.2 Language

Language is an intrinsic aspect of any culture and this was realised by the interviewees. Four of them indicated that at the beginning of their study, not surprisingly, language was the major challenge they faced. For instance, listening to lectures and coping with the prescribed reading was quite challenging for them. One interviewee talked about the two-fold pressure she experienced in adjusting to a new environment while coping with a large study load at the same time.

Besides language, becoming familiar with Western academic genres such as the assignment, critique, or literature review was one of the crucial tasks they had to tackle soon after the commencement of their programmes. This is because academic genres in the Chinese academia are different from those of the West. Three out of six interviewees mentioned that they learnt new genres primarily by doing course work assignments through which they gained feedback and exchanged ideas with lecturers and peers. One interviewee received no bridging orientation before the commencement of her programme and did not know the requirements for assignments at her new university. She only came to realise the challenges she faced when she received a 'C-' for her first assignment. She commented:

When you have just arrived, you do not know that you will have problems if no one tells you. You really have no idea, until you get your first assignment back.

Later, she contacted the lecturer for help and the lecturer suggested she seek assistance from student learning support.

Four interviewees indicated that their course work experiences had helped their understanding of Western academic requirements and thus had significantly prepared them for thesis writing. The engagement with lecturers and peers, and assistance from student learning support seemed to play an important role in facilitating this process.

5.2.1 The linguistic demands of the thesis

For EAL students, raising their existing linguistic repertoire to a higher level was probably one of the most challenging tasks they faced in writing a thesis. Only one interviewee indicated that language was not an issue for him and this could largely be attributed to his discipline. He noted that in his field, language was not a major obstacle because ‘the figures will speak for themselves’.

However, other interviewees felt differently. One of them, while discussing her vocabulary difficulties, noted that the ‘exact words don’t just pop up the moment I need them’. The other described the feelings of helplessness and frustration she experienced when she was revising her thesis after it had been examined. Although she hired a proof reader and received help from her supervisor in correcting and improving language, she felt that she was ‘just struggling for nothing’ and was not confident that she was capable of making the revision better: ‘I have reached the bottom line of my ability. That’s all I can do!’

As for how they improved their linguistic capacity, five of out six interviewees indicated that they improved their command of English by reading extensively in their field. One noted that ‘you can get a better sense of writing style and genre through reading’. Another said that he had not found writing the theoretical framework problematic but did not know how to describe specific issues so he looked at the

literature to see how people with similar ideas expressed themselves.

Applying the English they had learnt to their writing was mentioned by three of the interviewees. One stated that ‘If you go on writing in the same old way, you don’t make new mistakes, therefore you won’t learn’.

Five out of six interviewees reported that their command of academic English writing benefited greatly from the thesis writing process.

5.3 Critical thinking in L2 context

Based on their experiences and observations, interviewees raised various issues pertinent to the understanding of both Eastern and Western critical thinking.

Four out of six indicated that they had heard about the concept of critical thinking while in their home countries. They viewed critical thinking as a different concept of epistemology, that is, ‘a different culture entails different ways of thinking’. Moreover, three interviewees pointed out that familiarity with the subject knowledge determined their analytical ability in that area. They believed that to think critically required sound knowledge of one’s discipline. One interviewee gave an account of the relationship between the depth of knowing particular knowledge and thinking critically about it:

It’s just our saying that after memorising the *300 Tang Poems* [唐詩三百首] thoroughly, you will understand what they mean even if you are not able to write them down. You have to memorise them so you have the idea of what they are in your mind. So this is a question of different cultural perceptions. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. It’s not that their [Western] perception is critical, and ours is not. It’s just they emphasise critical thinking a great deal. There is definitely critical thinking in China, but maybe

not at undergraduate level. At that level, students are still absorbing the basic knowledge. If you ask Westerners to read one of the *300 Tang Poems* and then offer some critical thoughts, do you think they will be able to do it? How critical can they be then? No one can jump to the step of reflection without taking the first step of understanding the content.

Similarly, the other interviewee noted that he was still at the stage of ‘consuming knowledge’, so he did not yet have ‘profound knowledge and critical thinking like an academic.’ Having mastered the content knowledge, he argued that critical thinking would result as a reflection of that knowledge.

On the other hand, when asked about their perceptions of Western critical thinking, one interviewee noted that in his discipline:

They simply like to debate. They like you to bring forward something new to convince them. Your stuff does not have to be perfect, but it has to be very innovative, you need to have strong arguments to support your opinion. They like this kind of stuff. Frankly, they like to publish something which has to refute what people have done earlier, and then they become famous. This is ALL they need!

His observation, of course, might not apply to other disciplines. However, when considering the above comments from various interviewees, it appears that there might be a different approach between the East and the West with regards to critical thinking.

In terms of learning to be critical in the Western sense, two interviewees thought this was a question of learning stages. EAL learners have to ‘start everything from scratch’ in a foreign land and it takes time to absorb new information and adjust to a new system. As one interviewee declared:

It’s not that we don’t have the ability, but we have to first

understand the whole thing, the whole context - in ENGLISH! - not in Mandarin. We are not here to discover the new notion called critical thinking; critical thinking exists in China too. It's just that we are now newcomers in the New Zealand context.

Obviously, to think critically is one thing, but to demonstrate it in academic writing in a second language is quite another. English proficiency is crucial if EAL learners are to express their critical thoughts in writing. Shortly after her arrival in New Zealand, one interviewee recalled that 'I wondered how I could write critically with my limited English! I could do so, if I was able to write in Mandarin.' Another spoke of how a limited linguistic repertoire made it difficult for her to convey nuances to Western readers. :

A certain phrase, if you do not use it properly, people may think that your writing is weird. And culture plays a vital role when it comes to the language. They [Western readers] might have interpreted your words in a different way because of the culture and its way of thinking.

Furthermore, another interviewee remarked that having the command of the dominant language means having the power to present an argument:

For Chinese or Asians in this context, we may hesitate for some time before raising any critical ideas, because our expressive capacity is not good enough. In normal English conversation, we don't even have the ability to convince others. Not to mention bringing out a controversial idea in front of so many native speakers of English. So we don't really have confidence to do things like this. But they are locals and their first language is English. So they can easily do it and they like to do it. If I am in China doing a seminar in Mandarin, I can easily bring forward something controversial too!

The previous two excerpts demonstrate two points which seem to be interlinked. First,

the nuances of language are vital in successfully conveying EAL learners' critical thoughts in English writing. Second, these learners had probably not anticipated the powerlessness they would experience because of their more limited English proficiency when they arrived at the host institutions.

Interviewees sought to overcome these difficulties by employing a number of strategies. They read extensively, practised their writing and exchanged ideas with peers as well as lecturers in order to generate understanding of Western academic thinking. One interviewee described his method of developing Western critical thinking:

It is essential you do a lot of in-depth reading and thinking, and exchanging your ideas with peers, especially those who are more knowledgeable than you, people like supervisors. This way, it fosters the process and development of critical thinking.

5.4 Supervision

Overall, four out of six interviewees reported that they had sufficient supervision but the other two were not satisfied; one had issues of power and autonomy in the supervisory relationship, and the other simply had too little supervision.

As discussed in the literature review, the academic encounter is a two-way interaction which requires mutual communication and understanding. In investigating supervision issues, the views of both parties should be considered in order to present the whole picture. Hence, interviewees' accounts here should be read with a reminder that these represent only one side of the story.

5.4.1 Supervisor's language assistance

Five interviewees received language assistance from their supervisors. Four of them, who had satisfactory supervision, acknowledged the burden they imposed on supervisors and appreciated the support they received. These four interviewees all viewed language as their own responsibility and thought that supervisors were not obliged to provide this support:

I think they [supervisors] have a right in choosing to do it or not. Personally if I were the supervisor, I would help students. But I don't think this is their obligation.

One, who agreed that language was not part of the supervisor's responsibility, noted that her supervisor was quite clear about what he would and would not do:

My supervisor was very clear to us that his responsibility was to work on the direction of our thesis. He was not available for hands-on assistance with the language. But at least he was willing to offer suggestions or relevant information, such as asking me to go to student language support, etc.

Another interviewee was aware of the issue of authorship relating to a supervisor's language assistance with the thesis. She thought that even if supervisors were willing to 'make all the corrections for students', it was not always helpful in terms of the students' own language improvement and time management of supervision. She argued that:

If the student's English is poor, and the supervisor makes a lot of corrections, it eventually becomes the supervisor's work. Moreover, it takes away the time you two could have spent on discussing the content which is directly related to the topic.

Of the five interviewees who received language assistance, only one thought it was part of the supervisor's duty to offer language support to *both* native and non-native English students. His comment underscores the politics which may exist in some supervisory relationships:

He [the supervisor] corrected grammar, punctuation, everything on the drafts of both native and non-native students. He did it quite carefully and thoroughly. Overall, as an academic, the practice of my supervisor is quite rigorous. Otherwise he would not have become a big name in this field. His name is on my thesis, and this will have an effect on his reputation. He thinks this is very important for him.

Despite not viewing language as a supervisor's responsibility, four interviewees pointed out that the most useful assistance with English writing comes from supervisors, rather than language tutors or writing workshops. This is because supervisors offer an in-depth critique on both general language and discipline-specific English. Moreover, interviewees can discuss feedback face-to-face with supervisors. One interviewee stated:

I think the most helpful person would be your lecturer, because s/he points out directly what to improve in your writing. This is the most effective way. The workshops are often held in big classes, which are not very useful for Masters students.

The dilemma appeared to be that interviewees did not take their supervisors' language assistance for granted, but seemed to value supervisors' help more than that of language tutors in this regard.

5.4.2 The availability of the supervisor

Four interviewees mentioned the busy schedule of their supervisors; for this reason two

female interviewees did not approach their supervisors for help as often as they might have liked. This may have been because they did not know whether it was appropriate for them to do so. One of them, while having trouble revising the returned thesis, did not want to ask her supervisor for help because she believed that the supervisor 'has fulfilled his responsibility'. The other stated:

Both of my supervisors read through my drafts with a lot of care. It's just sometimes I feel that they are too busy. I don't know how to explain this, but I feel it. Maybe it's because I know they're always preparing for a meeting or something, so I feel a bit embarrassed if I stay longer in the meeting as if I'm occupying too much of their time.

It should be noted that this interviewee indicated in the survey that 3 hours of supervision per month was sufficient for her.

As reported, one interviewee suffered because of the absence of supervision. She considered her supervision inadequate on two counts. First of all, the supervisor demonstrated very little commitment to the supervisory relationship. He often did not respond to the interviewee's drafts, and was late for, or forgot about, appointments with her. When she could not find samples to do her research, he did not show his concern. The lack of supervision was evident:

Each time our meeting was only for about 10-15 minutes. Mostly he was very busy, flying everywhere like Taiwan or Thailand for business trips. We did not meet regularly. There was no guarantee that I could see him each week. Sometimes I did not see him for one or two months! I once emailed him my draft of the literature review, but he did not send me any feedback. And I wentWhat the hell? No feedback! NOTHING! I could not go on and work on the methodology section, and design my questionnaire, because I could not find any hotels. So I was hanging there.

Secondly, the interviewee was critical of her supervisor's ability to supervise the writing process. She stated:

I had very bad luck having a supervisor whose supervisory capacity is below standard. Even if he had tried hard to supervise me, his professional ability is not good enough. He seemed to have no clue how to supervise students.

She eventually had to apply for an extension for her thesis because she spent a long time looking for participants. She was the only interviewee who did not receive language support with her thesis. Although she did not believe that her supervisor should act as a language tutor, she indicated that she at least needed her supervisor to correct her colloquial expressions and thus ensure her writing met academic conventions. Having undertaken her thesis without sufficient supervision, she was worried about her thesis results.

The availability of a supervisor also depends on his or her idiosyncrasies. One interviewee commented:

I think it depends on a single lecturer's personality. If the supervisor is willing to do it for you, s/he will do it well. If the person does not want to do it, for example, if s/he is a selfish or a bad-tempered person, s/he can just say to you 'take it back and do it again'.

This interviewee also considered his supervision to be inadequate as far as personal interaction was concerned. For him, it was not a question of quantity of the supervision he received, but rather the quality of the interaction between the two parties. He said 'in fact, the longer the supervision was, the longer I had to suffer'. He pointed out that his supervisors were not interested in his culture and this had constrained their interactions. His supervisors only wished to discuss academic matters. This appeared to

be the dilemma he faced. On the one hand, he met them for at least 6 hours per month, and their academic critique and assistance was rigorous. It would seem to be unreasonable for him to complain. On the other hand, a working relationship which involved nothing but academic matters was somewhat impersonal for him.

As far as academic work is concerned, they are doing a good job. But I feel,...how shall I say.....actually it's not easy to balance the human interactions. They do what they are supposed to do, however, I am still not happy with them. Why? It is mainly a cultural issue. They had no interest in Asian culture. Our relationship is merely for academic purposes; we don't have any personal relationship.

Contrary to the previous descriptions of two unsatisfactory supervisions, one interviewee was very satisfied with his supervision. He described his supervisor as 'very human', noting that:

If a supervisor knows your cultural background, your circumstances and difficulties, there are very few barriers in the supervision. My supervisory relationship was great!

Their initial interactions were quite informal and involved the sharing of personal experiences of each other's home countries. In the relationship, the interviewee, who was in his early forties, clearly knew what he expected from his studies and what the supervisor could provide for him. His agency was respected by the supervisor and, thus there was no hierarchical 'power issue' between them:

My supervisor often said that 'we need dialogue', as long as there is dialogue between us, there will be understanding. If there is no conversation between the two parties, but just the academic teaching like technique....We are not here to learn the technique, we are here to develop the skills to handle problems from various perspectives.

This supervisory relationship seemed to be characterised by some of the elements that were missing from the two unsatisfactory supervisions, namely, mutual respect, communication and a personal relationship.

5.4.3 Autonomy and power

The four interviewees who were satisfied with their supervision, were also satisfied with the autonomy that they had to do their research and write their theses. Generally, there was on-going communication between the two parties. One recalled that she had decided to accept her supervisor's suggestion of not adding more information just before submitting her thesis. She later realised that the supervisor had offered 'a very practical advice'. In this case, negotiation and discussion served as an opportunity for her to rethink some of her ideas and to eventually make her own choice. Hence, even though she followed her supervisor's advice, she was the one who was in charge of her thesis.

Another interviewee also demonstrated autonomy, stating that 'basically my supervisor respected the way I did my work and he offered guidance all along the way. This is my thesis, not his thesis. If he imposes his own ideas upon me, I won't feel comfortable'.

One interviewee had very little autonomy in doing his research. He experienced a significant power struggle with his supervisor as he had been obliged to work in an area which catered for his supervisor's interest, rather than his own:

My biggest issue is the communication with my supervisor in the general research direction, as he did not allow me much research freedom. What he wanted to do was not what I was interested in doing. I explained what I would like to do in my research proposal; but that was not his concern at all. He was only interested in what

he was doing. The topic which he was interested in, up to now I can prove that it was wrong.

Although he negotiated with his principal supervisor and eventually even proved that his supervisor's project was not feasible, he did not succeed in gaining autonomy over his research. Hence, there was no niche for him to express his voice and establish a sense of authorship for the work. He also considered that his research was 'too late' to make a contribution because his supervisors had not supported his desire to publish the research. His expression was tinged with regret:

Someone else has already done a study similar to mine and got it published. Now my research only has limited meaning. If he [principal supervisor] had allowed me to publish the paper much earlier, I would have made the contribution before the others.

As a result, his academic performance was hampered to a great extent as he lost motivation for his study. He admitted this: 'You know if you lose your interest, it is the most serious issue. Conversely, if you study something you like, you have great motivation for doing it'.

In addition, the interviewee felt that his supervisor had missed an opportunity to learn from him:

Whether it's your supervisor or mine, their visions are not necessarily broader than ours on certain issues. By doing the research for supervisors, you are helping them to better understand a particular issue. At each weekly meeting, not only you are learning, but they are also learning something.

Obviously, he did not view his supervisor as an authority who knows everything. This is noteworthy because it is contrary to the stereotyped view of Westerners' general impressions of learners from Asia.

In the two unsatisfactory supervision cases, one supervisor was the programme leader; the other was internationally recognised in his field. Understandably, the two interviewees were most concerned that their confidentiality in this research was fully protected. They both tolerated the unsatisfactory situation because they did not want to risk not receiving their qualifications:

The most important thing is, I don't want to annoy him [the supervisor] before I get the qualification, I am afraid that he will take revenge. You don't know when you will have to go to him and ask for something. He is the programme leader AND the supervisor. As far as I know, none of his students ever went to him and complained directly.

It was striking that these two participants, particularly the one who received little supervision, did not take any action to report the inadequacy of the supervision. It appears that the two participants did not have the confidence to negotiate different arrangements that would have suited them better, and thus accepted the status quo.

5.5 University Support

5.5.1 Evaluation of language assistance

Generally, universities provided two types of language support: one-on-one tutorials and writing workshops. These are free services for all students and attendance is usually voluntary. In the present study, four out of six interviewees reported that the language support offered by their universities was insufficient.

As far as language tutorials are concerned, interviewees pointed out that language tutors only commented on a limited number of pages. Two of the interviewees hired

proofreaders outside the universities because they knew that language tutors were not available to read the whole thesis for them.

Another issue was that language tutors' knowledge was often limited to their own fields of expertise. Hence, it was not possible to accommodate the needs of students from a variety of disciplines. One interviewee commented:

People at student learning support do not teach you new things; they only pick up your mistakes. They only focus on the language, not the content, because that's not their professional area.

Another interviewee hardly utilised student academic support, because:

I feel that they [language tutors] may have little understanding of the knowledge of my field. The conventions and format of thesis requirements in our field may be not the same as those they normally know or practise.

The other stopped using this service because he found that after two visits the service did not provide what he needed:

He [language tutor] worked on the sentences, not the ideas. But I thought my assignment was not good enough, so I found another person in the same team to read my draft again. Eventually, I submitted the assignment, and got a C+. After the assistance of two tutors, I lost interest in looking for their help. Their corrections were only on the language. I can ask anybody to work on my language. They cannot offer comments on your disciplinary ideas. So their help can only be mediocre.

Two of the students did seek regular language assistance from student services. However, both approached this service more for the purpose of proofreading than to engage with language tutors to improve their academic English.

As for workshops, such as postgraduate writing workshops or academic writing for

EAL students, the majority of interviewees agreed that bridging workshops work well in offering new postgraduate students an overall orientation to Western epistemology and academic conventions. One commented that the workshops were useful ‘not in terms of making great progress in writing, but in terms of getting different ideas’. The other noted that the workshops are good for ‘those who have no idea of the differences between writing in Mandarin and in English’.

There were probably two main reasons why interviewees did not think these workshops were sufficient. First, the workshops were not aimed specifically at EAL learners or were not sufficiently tailored to learners’ needs. One interviewee attended an academic writing workshop for non-native students and thought it was ‘useless’ because the lecturer lacked understanding of EAL students’ needs. He remarked ‘ I think those who teach us have not yet heard our voices’.

Secondly, the teaching in the workshops was not in-depth, often because the workshops themselves were brief. One interviewee noted that in the academic writing workshops, ‘they teach you those theoretical paradigms, but they only touch on them superficially’. The other suggested that thesis workshops should be designed in parallel with the whole thesis writing process, instead of for instance offering one-day or two-day packages.

One interviewee paid for an academic writing course which lasted for several months and she found it ‘very useful’. She was advised by her friend to enrol on this writing course before the commencement of her Masters papers. During this course, she learnt typical Western genres and the knowledge to ‘tackle an assignment’. Moreover, after she started her Master’s programme, she was allowed to send drafts of assignments to this writing lecturer and received in depth corrections and commentaries. She also had

the opportunity to discuss the commentaries with the writing lecturer. As a result, her first assignment received an 'A-' which was quite an achievement for an EAL student's first assignment.

One interviewee commented on the responsibility of universities to provide language support to EAL thesis writers. He argued that it is probable that 'most second language speakers who engage in writing theses will need language support'. If universities do not want to provide this support, they should 'raise admission criteria'. Once universities have accepted EAL students at postgraduate level, they have indicated that they feel these students have the necessary linguistic skills to complete the qualification and they should be prepared to assist this group of students to manage the challenging linguistic situations.

In summary, it appears that what the interviewees needed most was not a language tutor who only corrected their grammar, but someone who had an understanding of a particular discipline and the conventions associated with that discipline. This was reflected in their opinions, reported earlier, that lecturers or supervisors are the most helpful persons in assisting them to improve their academic English. Interviewees also expressed the need to have workshops held over a prolonged period of time and targeted to EAL students' needs so that the teaching could be more fruitful.

5.5.2 Service of university staff

Four interviewees mentioned the issue of cross-cultural understanding and the communicative competence of university staff, including lecturers. Three of them had various unpleasant experiences in dealing with university staff about administrative matters. There was mention of the 'that's not my job' working mentality and that

students are ‘treated like a ball being kicked around from one person to another’. Students, while already burdened with a heavy workload, had to run around different departments of the university to resolve problems because ‘no one would take the ball!’.

Of course, their native-speaking peers may also encounter the same situations, but new EAL students who are not familiar with the dominant culture and are less articulate in English are more likely to experience a higher degree of pressure or anxiety. One interviewee recalled her visit to the international centre of her university, where a staff member, who was a non-native speaker himself, told her that ‘if you want to study in this university, you will have to improve your listening!’ She felt that the lack of ‘empathy’ from university staff was distressing, and added unnecessarily to her burden. She stated:

Particularly people who work in the student service unit, they have to have a basic understanding of our challenging situation. When we are in trouble, their service must reflect the willingness to help us!

Two interviewees were concerned about the intercultural understanding of the teaching staff and its importance to the quality of teaching. One of them spoke of the cost of studying in New Zealand from an international student’s point of view:

There are so many international students coming to New Zealand to study; this country relies on the educational industry as one of their main sources of revenue. If they don’t offer quality teaching which features cross-cultural sensitivity, how will they improve their teaching and learning outcomes? How are the graduate students here going to compete with those from America and UK? For international students, imagine after they graduate and go back to their own countries, but don’t find the qualifications they get here to be an advantage in the market. This will not seem to be fair

for them.

On a multicultural campus, the university staff's understanding of the challenges faced by overseas students is increasingly important. A lack of understanding not only has a negative impact on students' overall adjustment to the institution and their learning outcomes, but in the long run will affect the university's reputation internationally.

5.6 Personal milestones

5.6.1 Perceptions of the value of the thesis

In Western academia, postgraduate students are expected to take an active role in engaging with information and knowledge. Interviewees were thus asked how valuable their theses were in making a contribution to their respective fields. One noted that 'the primary thing in my postgraduate study is that it was a learning process for me. I did not expect that I would make a huge contribution to the academic field'. Another said:

I feel... [a bit shy], I feel yes. But, as to the extent of the contribution to the field, it is not what I can judge by myself. I believe that I have put a lot of effort into this work, and I have enough references. I think my argument is sound and strong. So I think it should be helpful to my field.

To her delight, her thesis received an 'A' from her examiners.

One interviewee whose thesis received an 'A' said that he had gained a certain understanding of his field; he considered that it was more important that he had contributed to his own knowledge.

Another commented that her topic was common, so she did not think she could make any contribution except 'offering some personal opinions and hope they can stimulate

other people to generate more ideas’.

Only one interviewee answered this question directly, which may partly be due to the quantifiable result of his research:

Yes, I think so. Because I have produced 7 or 8 syntheses so far, there are methods in biology to verify the compounds of the syntheses that I made. I feel my work is valuable to the knowledge of my field.

As can be seen, most interviewees were hesitant to make a direct claim. They seemed to be more concerned about their own learning, rather than their contribution to the field of knowledge.

5.6.2 The significance of studying a foreign degree

All six interviewees were very positive about their decision to come to an English-medium university. When asked about the significance of pursuing a Western qualification, they spoke of the improvement of their English language, English writing and logical thinking. Four of them stressed that the understanding of a new culture and its educational system was invaluable. They noted that they now have empathy for other people who live and study in a foreign country.

Two interviewees pointed out that confidence was a crucial factor to surviving difficult times. Their self-confidence was interrelated to the sufficient external resources they sought or received namely, supervision, exchanging ideas with peers and library resources. Coincidentally, these two interviewees reported that they enjoyed autonomy in doing their research and both received first class honours at their graduation.

In addition, five of them expressed a sense of achievement in learning to do research

and producing a thesis; and viewed the overall progress they had made during this time as an important personal milestone. One interviewee mentioned that the meaning of her Masters degree was a 'confirmation' that she had reached a high level of academic study. The other interviewee talked about how she discovered that she actually appreciated the Western postgraduate study style, which allows greater autonomy for the thesis writer. She came to recognise the significance of her achievement after the submission of her thesis:

For me, the most important thing in my postgraduate study is that it is a learning opportunity. Even though at the beginning, I was wondering 'my god, my supervisor did not seem to offer much help and I paid so much money. And it looked like I was only studying by myself, then why am I paying this money?'. But after I had completed my thesis, and looked at the my thesis in binding, I had quite a sense of achievement, and knew that I have learnt so much.

She encountered several major difficulties including an unexpected financial crisis, a visa problem and being told by an unfriendly staff member that she had to pay for an extension whereas other peers did not have to. As a dedicated Christian, her religious practice helped her and she graduated with second class honours.

Another described her feelings after submitting her thesis ' I feel as if I have given birth to a child!'. She was proud of herself for achieving something that she would never have dreamt was possible three years earlier.

One interviewee mentioned that he upgraded his academic knowledge by learning a new approach to research. The foreign study experience helped him develop a clearer vision for his future career path. He noted that 'if I compare how I was with what I am now, I am much clearer about what I am going to do with my career in the future'.

5.7 Summary of interview findings

Language

As second language speakers who were studying overseas for the first time, the interviewees all understood the pressing need to improve the language in their theses. This included gaining discipline-specific vocabulary and nuances of English expression which, in turn, would have a great effect on their ability to reflect critically in their writing. The strategy they utilised the most to enhance their language was extensive reading and practising their writing. Additionally, engaging with lecturers and peers were considered to be useful in learning Western critical thinking.

Supervision

Most interviewees did not think that language correction was a supervisor's responsibility. However, interviewees perceived the language assistance they received from supervisors as being more valuable than assistance from language tutors.

The availability of the supervisor was more than an issue of supervision time. Participants were concerned more about the quality than the quantity of supervision. The most satisfactory supervision was seen as very 'human' by one interviewee. In contrast to this, the two unhappy supervisions both lacked personal interaction. It seems the quality of the interaction between the two parties is the key for successful supervision.

Overall, interviewees did not seem to be aware that they could play a proactive role in seeking a supervisory relationship which might better suit their needs. They mostly remained passive in accepting the status quo.

University support

Interviewees' expressed their need for more effective language support targeting EAL learners. The support provided by both language tutorials and workshops needs to be expanded in terms of depth of content as well as length of support.

Cross-cultural sensitivity was another factor influencing interviewees' overall adjustment to host universities and satisfaction with teaching quality. It appears that greater cultural understanding is more likely to give rise to greater empathy for the challenging situations faced by EAL learners.

Personal milestones

All interviewees confirmed that their postgraduate study in New Zealand had been an enriching experience. Their personal growth in this cross-cultural experience was perceived as being more important than a thesis. Self-confidence was seen as essential by some interviewees, to sustain their endeavour throughout the period of thesis writing. In the process of gaining Western academic literacy, they learnt different approaches to research, as well as gaining an understanding of a new education system and a new culture. Their personal horizons were expanded as a result of the learning progress they had made.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

This discussion draws on the findings of both the surveys and the interviews, and aligns them with the literature. First of all, an overview of the data is presented in the introduction. Then, three main issues are discussed. Thirdly, the limitations of the findings are acknowledged, followed by recommendations for future research. Lastly, a conclusion is provided.

6.1 Introduction

As explained in Chapter 3, the surveys and interviews served as complementary devices to investigate participants' experiences. In the survey, 37 participants indicated the extent of the challenges they faced in working on their theses. Then, the 6 interviewees gave a more detailed account of their thesis writing experiences. Through the interviews, it was possible to capture a more fine-grained picture that included details of perceptions and feelings.

First, it was clear from both the surveys and the interviews that participants sought to improve their academic English primarily through extensive reading and frequent writing practice. The interview findings indicated that these practices were an effective way to increase discipline vocabulary, to gain genre knowledge and to generate an understanding of Western critical thinking.

Second, the survey findings suggested that the majority of supervisors understood participants' difficulties in L2 thesis writing, and this was reflected in the interviews of the four participants who were satisfied with their supervision. Interestingly, the survey findings indicated that the amount of time provided by the supervisors did not appear

to be the main factor contributing to the participants' satisfaction. In the interviews, it was revealed that the personal interaction between the two parties significantly affected the quality of supervision and this, in turn, determined students' satisfaction. Additionally, the emotional support from supervisors appeared to be perceived positively, although participants did not seem to think that they were entitled to this support.

Finally, in the survey, the frequency with which participants utilised student services was usually secondary to the assistance received from peers and supervisors. In the interviews, participants' remarks suggested that the language support offered by universities did not effectively meet the needs of EAL thesis writers.

6.2 Support for EAL thesis writing

6.2.1 Academic support

The language challenge was pervasive in participants' study experiences, whether it was at the initial stage of their study or during thesis writing. Admission to the programme indicates that they had all met the minimum language requirements. However, in the actual practice of thesis writing, participants experienced varying degrees of difficulty with the language, regardless of the efforts they made to overcome this challenge. They strived to gain structural and rhetorical knowledge to improve their research English through intensive reading and writing, which is consonant with the findings of Tardy's (2005) study. However, the survey findings also indicate that over 40% of participants struggled to cope with the demands of English when writing their theses (see Figure 2). This confirms the statement of Cooley and

Lewkowicz (1997) that there is a need to differentiate between EAL learners' abilities to pass language tests such as IELTS and the linguistic capacity required to write a thesis.

Apart from students' own efforts and their supervisors' assistance, the findings of the study also point to the necessity of universities offering a 'systematic support programme' (Farquhar, 1999, p. 119) to facilitate EAL students' thesis production. According to the survey findings, participants relied mostly on self-study and assistance from supervisors and peers to overcome their academic challenges. Help sought from student services was almost always secondary to the assistance of supervisors and peers (see Tables 2,3,4 and 5). This appears to indicate that the language services provided for these students do not adequately cater for their needs and might partly explain why supervisors are facing increasing time pressure supervising EAL thesis students (Strauss, Walton, & Madsen, 2003).

In this study, participants voiced their need for more discipline-specific and long-term language support that is specifically tailored to EAL postgraduate students' needs. It is also desirable, as pointed out by the participants and other studies (Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz, & Nunan, 1998; Paltridge, 1997), that EAP support workshops or thesis writing programmes are introduced to students at an early stage of their candidature. At present, it seems that if students are to receive sufficient language or writing assistance, they have to pay for EAP courses elsewhere. This has a financial implication that universities, in their role as educational providers, would need to consider carefully. Better facilitation of the work of their EAL students could lead to better research outputs, which in turn would boost the university's international standing. This could translate into financial benefits through greater student enrolment.

In addition, the findings suggest that using completed and examined theses as teaching materials could prove to be useful in writing workshops. This is a very direct and practical way to introduce this particular genre to EAL students who have never had thesis writing experiences in English. It is also essential that teaching staff understand the challenges these learners face, in order to better facilitate the teaching and learning process.

6.2.2 Emotional support

The period of thesis or dissertation writing, accompanying research, lasts for a minimum of one semester. Thus students need to maintain persistent dedication to their work during this time. Such dedication is not easy and EAL thesis writers need support in facing the mounting pressure of work, making the necessary adjustments to the host institutes and seeking help with their theses. Contrary to Dong's (1998) findings about EAL graduate students in the field of Science, participants of this study did not seem to lack a social network. The survey results indicate that, particularly in non-academic areas, participants relied more on the support of their peers than on supervisors and student learning support (see Tables 8, 9 and 11).

The data of the interviews demonstrated that participants experienced a variety of emotions. They described their feelings of satisfaction or anxiety about supervision or the administrative service of universities. Some were disappointed at the teaching quality, which was at times perceived as lacking in cultural sensitivity. One mentioned feelings of resentment toward the ethnocentric attitude of the host culture. While some of these observations may be interesting and insightful, it appears that sometimes the culture shock was such that it coloured their perceptions. Ideally, this cultural impact

ought to be addressed explicitly and dealt with as far as possible by the learners themselves and their respective host universities, so that negative consequences on both sides can be avoided or alleviated.

In the literature, the emotional needs of EAL thesis writers does not appear to be regarded as a topic to be investigated on its own. Yet, several studies that have adopted a cross-cultural or sociocultural view, such as Bronson (2004), Morita (2004) and Riazi (1997), were able to address this dimension within an investigation of the complexities facing EAL thesis writers. The present study also referred to two studies by Cadman (1997 and 2000), which acknowledge EAL learners in their entirety and address their voices. In Mandarin, interestingly, the concept of voice is composed of two characters which are 心聲. 心 (pronounced as xin), meaning heart and 聲 (pronounced as sheng), meaning sound or voice. 心聲 symbolises the *sound of the heart* or *voice from the heart*. Arguably, it seems to be difficult to hear people's voices without acknowledging their emotions, which come from the heart rather than the mind.

Although the findings strongly indicate that participants utilised their social networks to gain both academic and emotional support, it was not clear whether they socialised only with peers from the same culture or with other international students. A study by Myles and Cheng (2003) reported that EAL postgraduate learners received a great deal of emotional support from peers from the same culture.

Given that information and support from peers was frequently sought by the participants, it might be helpful for universities to actively initiate support groups for EAL learners who are working on theses. These students are 'in the same boat', so to speak, therefore they understand each other's difficulties. As discussed, the function of this kind of network is not limited to exchanging and generating ideas on academic

work; it effectively serves as emotional support as well.

6.3 Supervisory relationship

6.3.1 Language assistance

The role of the supervisor in providing language assistance to EAL learners is a contentious issue. The findings of this study demonstrate that out of five interviewees who received language assistance from their supervisors, four of them felt they had satisfactory supervision. Among these four interviewees, three of them received good thesis results while one interviewee was still working on the thesis at the time of interview. Although most participants did not feel that the supervisor was obliged to correct their language, language support from supervisors was in fact regarded as the most effective way to improve students' academic English. This finding was in line with one of Dong's (1998) survey results that it is very useful for students to consult a specialist in their field when they apply what they have learnt to their writing.

The complexity of this issue reported in this study corroborates the work of Knight (1999) and Strauss, Walton and Madsen (2003) The role of the supervisor is complex both professionally and morally (Knight, 1999), and s/he may view language assistance as part of her/his responsibility or view such assistance as a favour. The findings from the interviews suggest that it is rather difficult for supervisors to decide to what extent they should offer language assistance. Thus, this issue is further complicated by a need to quantify such help, to decide to what degree the supervisor will offer assistance. If a supervisor decides not to take on this responsibility, students will obviously face more difficulties, as exemplified by one case in this study. On the

other hand, if a supervisor spends a large amount of time on correcting an EAL student's written language, it means a significant amount of the supervision time would not be spent on discussing the content, adding more pressure to supervisors (Strauss, Walton, & Madsen, 2003). There is no easy solution in this regard. It is therefore reasonable to infer that an open dialogue between the two parties on the issue of language assistance would be useful at the beginning of supervision (Knight, 1999).

6.3.2 Academic supervision and personal interaction

According to the data in the surveys, the average supervision time that participants indicated they needed was 6.19 hours per month. However, the amount of time spent with the supervisor did not seem to be the major factor in a successful supervisory relationship. The two supervisions regarded by participants as being unsatisfactory appeared to be a result of a lack of mutual respect and dialogue. The other four interviewees all indicated their satisfaction with their supervisory relationships but this did not necessarily mean they received longer periods of supervision than the other two.

Understandably, supervision involves two human beings in close collaboration. If the discussion centres only on academic work, it could be viewed by the students and/or the supervisors as being too serious or lacking in human touch. The findings suggest that supervision which is characterised by mutual respect and interactive communication is more likely to deal successfully with issues of power. Moreover, it seems that supervision built upon cross-cultural understanding tends to be warmer and naturally involves personal interactions, as illustrated by one interviewee, who placed high value on his supervision. The participants' emphasis on the quality rather than the

length of time spent in supervision implies that supervision with personal interaction might be desirable and appreciated. Hence, what they meant by *quality* of supervision appears to be closely intertwined with two elements: cross-cultural understanding, and personal interaction. Arguably, this kind of quality is very positive in terms of facilitating EAL students' learning and is the most enjoyable for both parties in terms of human interaction.

6.3.3 Power and EAL learners' agency

In this study, the two dissatisfied interviewees were both afraid that they would not be able to receive their qualification if they upset their supervisors by seeking solutions via a third party. Therefore they took no action to solve their problems and, as a result, experienced additional difficulties in their thesis production.

As discussed in 2.2.2, the 'powerful role' (Morita, 2004, p. 598) that supervisors play should not be underestimated. In the survey findings, participants indicated that they would mostly seek solutions from their supervisors when they faced supervisory issues (see Tables 6.7 and 10). Therefore, it was expected by the researcher that during the interviews, the interviewees would demonstrate that they were proactive in dealing with supervisory matters. However, in the six cases, there was only one interviewee who actively negotiated with his supervisor for the 'research freedom' he felt he deserved. There was no direct evidence to prove that he would have taken this active role if he had had a relatively smooth supervisory relationship.

The other four interviewees who did have a relatively smooth supervisory relationship somehow appeared to passively accept whatever was offered by their supervisors. In these four cases, the supervision they received was viewed to be generally sufficient.

Nevertheless, they did not consider that there might be a better way to undertake their supervision and that their supervisors might have appreciated their thoughts in this regard. This passivity was exemplified most clearly by the two female interviewees who, to a certain extent, refrained from approaching their supervisors. Both the interviewees and their supervisors might have benefited in other ways by more active engagement on the part of the students.

It appears, from the cases of both the satisfactory and the unsatisfactory supervision, that interviewees in this study did not seem to fully recognise their 'right' (Bronson, 2004, p. 29) and role as an 'active force' (Oxford, 2003, p.80) in a co-constructed supervisory relationship. A number of possible factors could have led to this passiveness, namely: a lack of language proficiency and thus lack of confidence in a cross-cultural communication; the Chinese cultural norm of politeness and face-saving; a lack of knowledge about resolving supervisory problems; and/or lack of prior awareness of possible supervisory issues. When a student does not recognise her/his responsibility in co-creating a dialogue, the supervision may become a matter of luck, depending on what supervisor s/he has and what style of supervision or interaction this particular individual uses; as one interviewee noted: 'it depends on a single lecturer's personality'.

Overall, participants' performance of agency was mostly demonstrated in the area of academic tasks. That is, they appeared to be fairly self-reliant when it came to tackling writing difficulties and seeking external resources. However, they did not seem to exert their sense of agency well when facing their supervisors.

Although there are channels for students to follow to resolve supervision difficulties, the experiences of the two dissatisfied interviewees signifies that it can be very

frightening for students to initiate action to resolve this kind of issue. It is perhaps necessary for the faculty to address this issue explicitly with students, for instance, at the thesis orientation workshop. Students have to be well informed about their rights before they officially embark on a supervisory relationship and need to be encouraged to take a proactive approach if problems occur.

6.3.4 Support for supervisors

According to the survey findings, supervisors play the most important role in assisting participants in the thesis writing process. This adds considerably to their workload. In the interviews, four interviewees acknowledged the extra burden they placed on their supervisors and appreciated the support they received. The findings also reveal that time pressure facing supervisors sometimes constrains their availability to students. Some students may be reluctant to approach their supervisors, as they are aware of the pressure that these supervisors may be under.

Both the findings of this study as well as earlier research (Strauss, Walton, & Madsen, 2003) demonstrate that it takes more time and energy to supervise EAL learners than native speakers. This means that supervisors may need support in gaining the relevant knowledge and skills to supervise students from non-English backgrounds. As the language assistance that some supervisors offered was regarded as very helpful, universities might want to consider a greater time allocation to those supervisors who are willing to offer this assistance.

To sum up, the quality of the supervisory relationship has a tremendous impact on a student's thesis production. Three aspects of supervision appear to be related to the availability of supervisors for students: language assistance, time allocation and

personal interaction. These elements in turn have an impact on students' thesis writing and hence may well contribute to satisfaction with supervision. On the other hand, students also need to realise their responsibility in co-creating a satisfactory supervisory relationship and learn to initiate negotiation with supervisors when necessary. EAL students have to be well informed about their rights and encouraged by universities to take action if they encounter problematic supervision practices.

6.4 Cross-cultural issues

6.4.1 Journey of learning and knowledge contribution

The journey that participants undergo in New Zealand is both a personal and an academic one. They consider the experiences of foreign higher education to be a learning opportunity, which over time would lead to significant personal growth. Their process-oriented perception seems to be associated with the Confucian approach to learning, which emphasises a passion for life-long learning, as discussed in 2.1. They made progress in various areas: different conceptions of knowledge, research skills, understanding of a different culture and its thinking, and an empathy for people from other cultures. They were humble about claiming to have added to the knowledge in the field but were confident about their work.

The issue of knowledge construction for EAL thesis writers appears to be correlated with learning autonomy and the ability to assert their voices in their theses. In the study, the four interviewees who perceived themselves as having their own voices in their theses all indicated that they had great autonomy in their work. However, despite the participants' self-perception, their supervisors or examiners may not agree that they

have projected their voices successfully and contributed valuable knowledge to the field. The supervisors' views investigated by Strauss and Walton (2005) indicated that EAL thesis writers often fail to 'make their unique contributions'(p. 58), and that their writings did not present a strong voice.

When asked about their perceptions of voice and authorship, interviewees were not particularly aware of the interrelation between 'advanced academic literacy' (Ferenz, 2005) and the capacity to establish authority in a 'successful academic writing' (Hyland, 2004, p.134). There are two possible explanations for this lack of awareness. Firstly, as mentioned in 2.2.2, the task at the first two levels of writing is daunting so that, despite immense efforts, EAL thesis writers do not have the extra time and energy to reflect on their writing in terms of constructing their unique voices. The interviewees' descriptions of their linguistic struggles and the hurdles they have had to overcome seem to support this speculation. Secondly, a few students may not have sufficient autonomy over their work, thus their writing cannot represent their own voices, as was exemplified by one case in the study.

6.4.2 Critical thinking

The data from the interviews indicated that most interviewees did not consider critical thinking to be a monopoly of Western culture. Two of them explicitly rejected the misrepresentation in some Western literature, which potentially carries a judgmental connotation that Asian students are incapable of critical thinking.

According to interviewees' comments, critical thinking is not conceived of as a binary opposition—either people are critical or they are not critical, as the dichotomy permeating the Western concept of critical thinking implies. But rather, it is a matter of

the stages of learning content knowledge in depth, and understanding the Western way of thinking. This view is similar to Adamson's (1993) account of critical thinking in which 'subject-specific background knowledge and a high degree of acculturation' (p.113) play essential roles. Participants' emphasis on learning stages also coincide with Kim's (2003) explanation of the two stages of Confucian learning, signifying that the Confucian philosophy on thinking and learning had great influence on participants. It seems that participants' views of EAL learners grappling with linguistic expressions in tandem with learning a new way of thinking, actually demonstrates living examples of critical thinkers who have a reflexive mentality.

6.4.3 Cross-cultural awareness

The importance of cross-cultural awareness for both academic and administrative staff was also highlighted throughout the study. From the EAL learners' perspectives, interviewees knew the improvement of academic English was mainly their own responsibility. They also understood that they were responsible for managing their stress, emotions, and time. They worked hard to bridge the gap from their side. However, in dealing with the challenges, they felt, on occasion, the need for staff services which reflected cross-cultural understanding and communicative competence. The fact that both academic and allied staff have different cross-cultural perceptions from the EAL learners had a major impact on the latter's study experiences.

The findings of the study underline the importance of university staff being cross-culturally sensitive and indicates how influential such sensitivity is for students' overall satisfaction and adjustment to host institutions. Myles and Cheng (2003) note that the goal of an intercultural campus cannot be achieved without the commitment of

‘faculty, staff and students’ (p.259). Consequently, it is suggested that universities in New Zealand need to recognise the importance of cross-cultural awareness, to foster an interculturally friendly environment.

6.5 Limitations

Several limitations of the study should be noted. The most serious limitation is the small size of the sample; only 37 students completed the survey and the interview findings were based on only 6 participants' experiences. Therefore, care must be taken in generalising the findings of this study to other Mandarin-speaking Masters students in New Zealand. As far as other groups of EAL postgraduate students are concerned, this study can only identify areas of possible interest for students, supervisors and researchers.

Secondly, those participants who agreed to be interviewed might well have been strongly motivated to share their experiences, particularly the negative aspects. Hence, while reading their insights and opinions, it must be borne in mind that they may not be representative of their Mandarin-speaking peers.

The third limitation concerns the design of the survey. One of the drawbacks was the limited number of options that were provided, based on the literature and the researcher's experiences. It is possible that these solutions did not represent all the strategies that students employed and that participants did not volunteer their own strategies.

The negatively phrased statements in the survey were intended to explore the more challenging aspects of thesis writing. However, it is acknowledged that this may have

influenced participants' responses to the statements.

6.6 Recommendations for future research

This study could be duplicated to investigate the same cultural group on a larger scale and explore areas that were not covered in the study. Future research could also examine the evolution of EAL learners' perceptions and the development of academic literacies over an extended period of time. Equally, it would be interesting in this context to compare results of Mandarin-speaking Masters students with those of different ethnicities.

The study also points to the need for future innovative research on the EAP mediation programmes targeting EAL thesis writers in New Zealand.

6.7 Conclusion

This study was initiated with the intention of exploring the experiences of Mandarin-speaking Masters students in New Zealand universities. The complexities involved within the process of composing a thesis in a second language were discussed. Participants' agency in confronting challenges and wrestling with multiple tasks were interpreted from a human perspective. That is, participants' backgrounds, personal characteristics and circumstances were all acknowledged in discussing their perspectives. The contribution of this study lies in the findings, which focus on the EAL thesis writing process rather than the result.

The findings demonstrate that constructive mutual learning can take place for both the host institution and its staff, as well as for the EAL postgraduate learners. In order for this to happen, EAL learners' presence and voices must be recognised as opportunities for reciprocal understanding and not viewed as being problematic. It is suggested that New Zealand universities may have to make a more conscious effort to listen to EAL learners' voices so that the provision of both academic and pastoral care can meet EAL learners' needs. The findings also indicate that supervision which is characterised by mutual respect and communication is most likely to promote effective learning. Indeed, supervision can be regarded as a form of human interaction that requires mutual respect and sensitivity for genuine communion to take place.

A human being is a part of the whole called by us “the universe”, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening the circle of understanding and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Albert Einstein

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Appendices

Appendix A: Consent form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Title of Project: An investigation into the thesis/dissertation writing experiences of Mandarin-speaking postgraduate students in New Zealand.

Project Supervisor: **Pat Strauss**

Researcher: **Chiung Ying Chang (Evelyn)**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project (Information Sheet dated 21 April, 2006)
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that the interview will be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a copy of the report from the research: tick one:

Yes No

Participant signature:

Participant name:

Participant Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

.....

.....

.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on

13 June, 2006 **AUTEC Reference number** 06/94

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix B: Information sheet

Participant Information Sheet



Date Information Sheet Produced:

21 April, 2006

Project Title

An investigation into the thesis/dissertation writing experiences of Mandarin-speaking postgraduate students in New Zealand.

Invitation

Thank you for volunteering to take part in this project. This thesis is part of the requirements for my Master of Applied Language Studies at Auckland University of Technology.

What happens in this research?

During this 1-hour interview, you will be asked questions based on your answers to the questionnaire. I will also invite you to share some of your perceptions about your academic study experiences in your host institution. For example:

·What do you see as your role in the process of supervision?

·What do you think the best way to improve academic writing?

If for any reason, you feel any discomfort during the interview, you can choose to withdraw from the interview immediately. And as a participant in this project, you can access AUT counselling's online services when necessary, even if you are not a student of AUT.

What are the benefits?

For me, this research is significant in the sense of developing my academic literacy by learning from my peers. By exploring the academic experiences, we as a group can learn from one another by becoming more aware our learning process. I believe that a self-reflective approach would be very beneficial for advancing our academic performance. It is hoped that insights gained in this research can be passed on to supervisors and university authorities.

How will my privacy be protected?

Please note that all attempts will be made to protect your confidentiality. It is unlikely that you will be identified as I will only be identifying trends and not focusing on specific student's comments. You are also free to withdraw from the research at any time up to the completion of data collection. There is no cost to you for participating in this project apart from the hour that you spend in the interview. If you are interested in receiving a summary of the findings, please indicate this in the 'Personal Information' section of questionnaire.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

Simply fill out the consent form and return it to me.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr. Pat Strauss, email pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz, phone: (09) 921 9999 ext 6847

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, AUTEK, Madeline Banda, madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz , (09) 921 9999 ext 8044.

Who do I contact for further information about this research?

Researcher Contact Details:

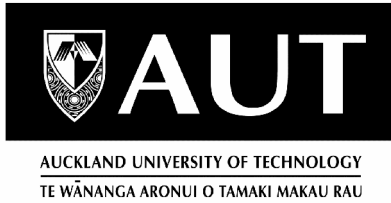
Chiung Ying Chang (Evelyn), e-mail: ryn1826@aut.ac.nz, contact phone: 021-137-8542

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Project Supervisor, Dr. Pat Strauss, email pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz, phone: (09) 921 9999 ext 6847

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 13 June, 2006, AUTEK Reference number06/94.

Appendix C: Questionnaire



Title of project

An investigation into the thesis/dissertation writing experiences of Mandarin-speaking postgraduate students in New Zealand.

Thank you for taking the time and effort to respond to this questionnaire. My name is Chiung Ying Chang (Evelyn); I am currently studying at Auckland University of Technology for my Master of Applied Languages studies. My thesis deals with the thesis/dissertation writing experiences of Mandarin-speaking postgraduate students and I would like to invite you to take part in this research. Please note that participation in this project is entirely voluntary.

I am very interested in finding out about the challenges you face and the strategies you use in the writing of your thesis/dissertation. It is also hoped that the research findings may also be useful for you in the sense that we can learn from each other's experiences. I have attached a questionnaire about these issues and I would appreciate if you could complete it and return it to me by e-mail at: ryn1826@aut.ac.nz

All your answers will be treated as confidential and you will not be identified in the

writing up of this material. Please note that completing the questionnaire is regarded as giving your consent to participation in the research. You may withdraw from the project at any time without any obligation.

Any concern regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to my Project Supervisor: Dr. Pat Strauss, her e-mail is:

pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz, phone: (09) 921 9999 ext 6847

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, AUTEK, Madeline Banda, madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz, (09) 921 9999 ext 8044

If you need any further information about this research, please contact me: Chiung Ying Chang (Evelyn), ryn1826@aut.ac.nz, phone: 021 137 8542

Below is an example to show how to tick your answer, you can simply copy the ‘x’ here to use in your own answers.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
		x		

Please answer the following 10 questions. Feel free to make comment in either English or Mandarin.

1. I experience difficulty in understanding the requirements of thesis/dissertation writing in my discipline, e.g. the structure and rhetorical demands or the function and characteristic in each section of thesis/dissertation.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

In facing this challenge, what particular solution do you employ to overcome it?

Please indicate all item(s) that apply to you:_____

1. I read published guides and handbook on thesis/dissertation writing.
2. I access the student learning centre/support.
3. I discuss issues with my peers.
4. I ask my supervisor for help.
5. I read extensively in my discipline area.
6. I do not need help in this regard.
7. Other (Please describe below).

2. I have insufficient English to cope with the reading and writing demands of completing a thesis/dissertation.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

In facing this challenge, what particular solution do you employ to overcome it?

Please indicate all item(s) that apply to you: _____

1. I study published books with respect to improving vocabulary, grammar, etc.
2. I seek the help of friends who are native speakers, for example checking my English writing or explaining to me the meaning of a particular word or sentence.
3. I access the student learning centre/support.
4. I ask my supervisor for assistance.
5. I read extensively in my discipline area.
6. I read articles with a focus on mastering English speakers' language use.
7. I do not need help in this regard.
8. Other (please describe below).

3. I have trouble structuring my writing to meet the demands of Western academic thinking.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

In facing this challenge, what particular solution do you employ to overcome it?

Please indicate all item(s) that apply to you: _____

1. I look at published guides and handbook on structuring coherent, logical writing.
2. I seek the help of friends who are native speakers in checking my English writing.
3. I access the student learning centre/support.
4. I ask for feedback from my peers.
5. I discuss with my supervisor.
6. I read extensively in my discipline area and pay attention to the overall structure of the article.
7. I do not need help in this regard.
8. Other (Please describe below).

4. It is not easy for me to grasp the Western notion of critical thinking.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

In facing this challenge, what particular solution do you employ to overcome it?

Please indicate all item(s) that apply to you: _____

1. I read published guides and handbook on Western critical thinking.
2. I access the student learning centre/support.
3. I discuss this with my peers.
4. I seek advice from my supervisor.
5. I read extensively in my discipline area.
6. I do not need help in this regard.
7. Other (Please describe below).

5. I feel that my supervisor has little understanding of the difficulties I face in writing my thesis/dissertation.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

In facing this challenge, what particular solution do you employ to overcome it?

Please indicate all item(s) that apply to you: _____

1. I speak to my supervisor.
2. I do not have a problem in this regard.
3. Other (Please describe below).

6. I receive an inadequate amount of time from my supervisor.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

I think I need at least _____ hours of supervision per month.

In facing this challenge, what particular solution do you employ to overcome it?

Please indicate all item(s) that apply to you: _____

1. I speak to my supervisor.
2. I speak to other staff members.
3. I access the student learning centre/support.
4. I talk to people who are in authority, e.g. Dean.
5. I do not have a problem in this regard.
6. Other (Please describe below).

7. I do not have enough time to improve my English while writing my thesis/dissertation.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

In facing this challenge, what particular solution do you employ to overcome it?

Please indicate all item(s) that apply to you: _____

1. I work on my own time management.
2. I seek advice from the student learning centre/support.
3. I talk to my peers.
4. I do not have a problem in this regard.
5. Other (Please describe below).

8. It is difficult for me to study on my own without a lot of guidance.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

In facing this challenge, what particular solution do you employ to overcome it?

Please indicate all item(s) that apply to you: _____

1. I talk to my supervisor.
2. I seek assistance from the student learning centre/support.
3. I exchange ideas with peers.
4. I do not have problem in this regard.
5. Other (Please describe below).

9. I feel that I am not allowed sufficient autonomy in doing my work the way I want.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

In facing this challenge, what particular solution do you employ to overcome it?

Please indicate all item(s) that apply to you: _____

1. I negotiate with my supervisor.
2. I seek advice from the student learning centre/support.
3. I discuss the issue with peers and ask their advice.
4. I do not have a problem in this regard.
5. Other (Please describe below).

10. Overall, I find it difficult to adjust to the host educational institution.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

In facing this challenge, what particular solution do you employ to overcome it?

Please indicate all item(s) that apply to you: _____

1. I share my experiences with my peers.
2. I speak to my supervisor.
3. I talk to my parents/other family members.
4. I do not have a problem in this regard.
5. Other (Please describe below).

Are there any other issues in relation to thesis/dissertation writing that you would like to raise?

Personal Information

Age:

Gender:

Home Country:

Is Mandarin your first language?

In which faculty are you currently enrolled ?

How far advanced are your postgraduate studies? _____

1. I have completed my thesis/dissertation
2. I am writing my thesis/dissertation at the moment
3. I am writing my proposal
4. I have not started working on my thesis/dissertation.

How long have you been in New Zealand? _____

1. Less than one year
2. Between 2-4 years
3. More than 5 years

Academic Information

Before coming to New Zealand, have you ever completed any English course that was specifically for academic writing?

Please indicate the number of answer that suits you: _____

1. Yes.

Please provide approximately the duration of the course(s) in terms of hours:

2. No.

After enrolling in your current programme, did you ever attend any course, whether it is compulsory or voluntary, for academic writing? (e.g. thesis/dissertation writing, proposal writing or disciplinary English composition, etc.)

Please indicate the number of answer that suits you: _____

1. Yes.

Please provide approximately the duration of the course(s) in terms of hours:

Overall, I find the course(s) very useful in improving the quality of my writing.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

2. No.

If you would like to receive a copy of research finding by e-mail, please provide your name (optional) and contact e-mail address.

Name (optional):

E-mail:

Thank you very much!

Request for interview

I am keen to talk to you in more detail about the writing of the thesis/dissertation. In particular, it will be interesting to know more about the strategies you employ in facilitating your thesis/dissertation writing. I would like to share and learn from your successful strategies.

If you are interested in sharing your experiences in an interview with me, I will be happy to travel to meet you. Please supply your name, contact phone number, and a place that is convenient for you. I will contact you to arrange a time that suits you. The interview will be conducted in Mandarin and will last for about an hour. If you contact me, I will send you an information sheet and a consent form.

Name:

Phone No:

Place: