Great Expectations:
A Qualitative Study of How Chinese Graduate Students Navigate Academic Writing Expectations in U.S. Higher Education

by

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Biographical Sketch

Hairong Shang-Butler was born in Hubei, China on December 13, 1980. She attended Wuhan University from 1999 to 2003, and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Language and Literature. When she was working in Wuhan as a college lecturer she obtained a Master of Arts degree in English Language and Literature from Wuhan University. She joined the doctoral program in Teaching, Curriculum and Change at the Warner Graduate School of Education and Human Development in 2010. As a member of various research teams, she has conducted qualitative research on engineers’ academic writing and supporting English language learners (ELLs), as well as social network analysis on underrepresented scholars’ academic productivity. She is currently involved in mixed-methods research on teaching candidates’ with early implementation of the edTPA licensure examination in New York State and Washington State. She has pursued her dissertation research on Chinese EAL graduate students’ experience of navigating academic writing expectations under the direction of Dr. Nancy Ares, and has worked as Visiting Assistant Professor in the Teaching, Curriculum and Change at the Warner School at the University of Rochester since September 2014.

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Abstract

Chinese graduate students make great contributions to receiving universities in the United States financially and academically. The increasing number of Chinese graduate students makes it necessary to study their experience of negotiating the unfamiliar expectations of academic writing in the United States. However, little research has explored their academic writing experience. This dissertation aims to explore how Chinese graduate students understand and navigate academic writing expectations in the United States.

I draw on two theoretical domains to inform my study - writing as a social practice as my primary theoretical lens and Bourdieu’s theory of social, linguistic and cultural capital as the complementary theory. This study begins with two rounds of semi-structured qualitative interviews with eight Chinese graduate students across disciplines and then document review of students’ writing samples with their instructors’ feedback, followed by a focus-group interview with three faculty members who have experience teaching or advising Chinese graduate students. Furthermore, open and focused coding was used to analyze the qualitative data.

This study provides insights about the complex writing experiences of Chinese EAL international graduate students around three major themes 1) navigating academic culture shock at graduate-level writing, 2) navigating social relations in writing, and 3) mobilizing resources and strategies available to make sense of and meet writing expectations.

This dissertation study provides a rich and nuanced understanding of how Chinese EAL graduate students understand, make sense of and navigate writing expectations. It has suggested the mismatch in writing expectations between Chinese and U.S. academic cultures in many ways, as well as the lack of adequate preparation and
international student-friendly support to EAL graduate students. Chinese graduate students had to conceptualize and negotiate academic culture shock and social relationships to transition into graduate level writing in the United States. Future EAL writing research should expand and explore further toward understanding EAL international students’ writing as a social construct.

*Keywords:* academic writing, writing expectations, Chinese graduate students, academic cultural shock, social relationships
Contributors and Funding Sources

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Chapter One: Introduction

Higher educational institutions in the United States are receiving more and more international students and are benefitting from the influx of international students financially and academically. It is commonly recognized that international graduate students make significant financial contributions to receiving universities (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). In the 2013-2014 academic year, 886,052 international students supported about 340,000 jobs, a 8.5% increase over the previous academic year and contributed about 26.8 billion dollars to the U.S. economy, a nearly 12% increase from the previous academic year (NASFA: Association of International Educators, 2014). Chinese students are the most numerous international student group in the United States. China has replaced India as the top country of origin for international students in the United States, and Chinese graduate students represent about 34% of all international graduate students in the United States. Additionally the number of Chinese graduate students has maintained several consecutive years of two-digit growth (Council of Graduate Students, 2013). In other words, Chinese graduate students have been contributing to receiving U.S. universities financially.

In addition to their economic contribution to higher educational institutions, Chinese graduate students are making significant contributions for U.S. universities to maintain a diverse range of academic subjects, especially mathematics and engineering (Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2010), and they promote scientific productivity of U. S. universities (Gaule & Piacentini, 2013). Chinese graduate students’ scientific output during their theses and dissertations are significantly higher than graduate students from other countries (Gaule & Piacentini, 2013). The influx of Chinese graduate students is benefitting U.S. higher educational institutions both financially and academically.
Although universities in the United States have kept their doors open to Chinese students, not all of them are prepared to meet Chinese students’ special needs and support their academic success. Like many international graduate students, Chinese graduate students are highly motivated to achieve high academic performance, but they face obstacles in many areas, including interacting with American faculty and students (Yan & Berliner, 2009; Zimmerman, 1995), lack of social networks and support systems (Dong, 1998), and financial problems (Sherry, Thomas & Cui, 2010). Additionally, studies show that Chinese students face more challenges than international students from other countries because China and the United States have a maximum cultural distance (Samovar & Porter, 1991), which makes it even more challenging for international students from China to adapt to U.S. culture in general, and academic culture in particular.

Chinese graduate students generally experience challenges adapting to American educational systems because of the fundamental difference in culture, language, social structure and academic expectations (Yan & Berliner, 2011). However, many researchers and educators perceive Chinese international students as hard workers and high achievers and fail to understand Chinese students’ challenges (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Hence Chinese students’ educational achievements often overshadow the challenges they face in the U.S. graduate programs. They, facing many difficulties, may feel “too frustrated to maintain the aspirations that had originally motivated them to relocate to the United States” (Yingyi, Austin, & Liu, 1995, p. 137).

Of all the challenges Chinese graduate students face in the United States, academic writing is a major obstacle and they often struggle with understanding and meeting academic writing expectations (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Chinese students often feel inadequately prepared for writing at graduate levels, and suffer from a lack
of “a smooth path from undergraduate to graduate study” and their writing experience is “characterized by struggle and deadlines” (Leedham, 2014, p. 127). Chinese graduate students have to “learn the norms, values, and expectations related to academic writing—as anyone seeking to engage in this community would— but also they have to learn the vehicle (i.e., the language, the words) for it, an additional challenge” (Van de Poel, & Gasiorek, 2012, p. 295). Furthermore, they are often confused in their roles, expectations and values in the new academic culture in the United States (Yan & Berliner, 2013). Additionally learning to write successfully in another language is tantamount for Chinese graduate students because as novice writers, they are forced to assume another identity in their academic writing practices.

Hence, Chinese graduate students, faculty and higher educational institutions in the United States should better understand how Chinese graduate students learn, make sense of and navigate academic writing expectations in the United States. However, not enough scholarly time and effort has been put in studying Chinese English as an Additional Language (EAL) graduate students’ writing experience of navigating writing expectations in the United States. Additionally even though writing instructors and professors recognize the presence and needs of EAL students, Chinese international students included, few of them make any special provisions to address the unique needs of EAL writers (Matsuda, Saenkhum, & Accardi, 2013). To this end, this dissertation study presents a qualitative study that explores how Chinese EAL graduate students navigate their writing experiences as well as what can be done to support this group of students with unique needs in writing.

**Problem Statement**

English academic writing is a core activity in research (Curry, 2002) and a major means to access, produce, and disseminate knowledge in American and international
research communities (Chang & Kanno, 2010). Academic writing, or academic text production, involves a complex set of cognitive tasks (Atkinson 1997; Ramannathan & Kaplan, 1996), and people need specialized information to write academic texts. Additionally, it is a “high stakes” activity in higher education contexts, as problems with writing can result in failing university education (Lillis & Scott, 2007).

While it is true that most graduate students suffer from adjustment obstacles in graduate level writing, international EAL students face additional challenges related to English language proficiency, meeting expectations that they are not familiar with, understanding and accommodating the social norms in the United States, and coping with stereotypes and discriminations (Wang, Lin, Pang & Shen, 2007).

Compared to their native counterparts, international EAL graduate students have less prior experience in English academic writing, and find it harder to navigate the expectations of their disciplinary community in the United States. EAL students from cultural and epistemological traditions outside of the United States often find it very challenging to conceptualize English academic writing as a constantly evolving process of discovering, questioning and reformulating arguments (Pennycook, 1996). Additionally, it is an extremely challenging task for EAL students to write English academic texts for an audience with different linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural expectations (Reid, 1997). Students often find that their understanding of writing mismatches the expectations from their main audience – instructors (Hardy & Clughen, 2012). It is especially true for international EAL students who come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. EAL students also may feel the difference in “both composing processes (and subprocesses: planning, transcribing, and reviewing) and features of written texts (fluency, accuracy, quality and structure, i.e., discoursal, morphosyntactic, and lexicosemantic)” (Silva, 1993, p. 657). They
may also “struggle with English academic writing conventions and genres” (Benesch, 2008, p. 84). In other words, international EAL students face challenges in terms of different writing conventions and expectations. Chinese international students, who are fostered in Chinese Gaokao (college entrance examination) educational systems, often encounter many challenges when they start their studies in the United States (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). Hence to better support Chinese EAL graduate students in their writing, the university writing center, the learning resources center, and the international students office should work together to provide writing support services to EAL graduate students (Yan & Berliner, 2011).

While academic writing is important for all EAL students in the United States, it is extremely crucial for graduate students because on the one hand, they “have developed relatively high levels of expertise in specific content areas, and have the opportunity to publish” (Benson & Hedish, 1995, p. 314). EAL graduate students are generally involved in research and publication, and English writing predicts their academic performance to a great extent (Chang & Kanno, 2010). As a fifth-year Chinese Ph. D student in a U.S. graduate program and also an instructor who works closely with Chinese EAL students, I can attest to the challenges they face in academic writing, especially in understanding and meeting writing expectations, and also the intricacies of making sense of and meeting writing expectations at a graduate level. I often see Chinese students struggling to understand academic writing expectations in the U.S that are significantly different from those in China. I have also seen how underprepared American higher educational institutions are to support this fast growing group of students, especially in supporting their writing. Hence in this dissertation study, I focus on the writing experience of Chinese EAL graduate students.
and how they navigate writing expectations that can be fundamentally different from those in China.

**Defining Academic Writing**

In this dissertation study, academic writing refers to academic text production or writing for academic purposes at the postsecondary level. Lea and Street (1998) claim three models of academic writing, including the study skills, academic socialization, and academic literacies. Furthermore, Casanave (2003) claims academic writing is a “socio-political process” which takes place in a social context where institutional norms, instructor and gatekeeper criteria are valued. Additionally academic texts are not static. Along the same lines, Hyland (2005) defines the academic writing process as “an act of identity” (p. 1092) because it conveys disciplinary content and also represents the writers’ voice.

The nine common types of academic writing at the graduate level at American universities include essays, research papers, short tasks of less than half a page, reports on experiments/observations with interpretation, summaries, case studies, plans/proposals, documented computer programs, and book reviews (Hale et al., 1996). Cooper and Bikowski (2007) further points out the disciplinary variation in the major types of writing. Specifically library research papers and project reports are the two major writing genres in the sciences, math, and engineering disciplines, while students in the social sciences, humanities, and arts are involved in a broader spectrum of academic writing tasks. To have a comprehensive grasp of Chinese graduate students’ writing experience in different disciplines, academic writing in this dissertation refers to the nine major types identified in the Hale et al. study.

Academic writing is “an activity for which formally stated curricular expectations appear highly liable to be influenced by external norms and
preoccupations” (Allison & Wu, 2001, p. 56). It is also recognized that people don’t just write, they write something for some purposes and audience (Gee, 1990).

Academic writing expectations involve encouraging students to make their own contributions to knowledge and follow dominant conventions. EAL graduate students write with a specific purpose, with meaning to the social group they represent and the individuals involved in it, and they need to meet various institutional and professional expectations of academic writing. However, as writing is a complicated activity involving cognitive, cultural and social processes (Reid, 1997), EAL users from different social, cultural, linguistic, and socio economic backgrounds often find their ways of writing do not necessarily match the practices of the American academic culture.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

There is an emerging need for scholars to investigate the major challenges that Chinese EAL graduate students have in academic writing and how they navigate academic writing expectations, and thus to meet writing expectations. However, based on my review of the literature, little scholarly time and effort have been spent in this field. Although the existing literature has established that Chinese graduate students struggle with academic writing in U.S. graduate programs (Yan & Berliner, 2009), more research should be conducted to explore how Chinese EAL graduate students navigate writing in an academic milieu and in various disciplines in the U.S.

Additionally in the existing literature, the academic writing experience of Chinese

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1 Conventions in academic writing is defined as “the formal rules and informal guidelines that define what is considered to be correct or appropriate” and incorrect (or inappropriate) in a piece of writing” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2012, p. 9). Specifically, conventions include “the surface feature of a text such as mechanics, spelling, and attribution of sources, as well as more global concerns such as content, tone, style, organization, and evidence” (p. 9).
students in Hong Kong have been over-represented and explored by researchers like Flowerdew (2000), Hyland (2005, 2008), while the writing of Mainland Chinese students are under-explored (Leedham, 2014) although Mainland Chinese students represent the largest group of EAL learners in China and the largest group of international students in the U.S.

Reaching some understanding of how Chinese EAL graduate students navigate expectations in academic writing is important on two accounts. First, studying how they experience academic writing expectations can promote attention to both their needs and rights in negotiating the unfamiliar demands of academic writing in their additional language – English. Second, the discussion can provide faculty, higher educational institutions and EAL writing researchers important information for understanding Chinese graduate students’ academic writing, which in turn can help educators to offer writing instruction, and inspire transformative work in teaching academic writing to Chinese EAL users, and maybe all international students (Cavdar & Doe, 2012).

Additionally, exploring how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations facilitates the understanding of the complexities, desires and passion as well as uncertainties underlying EAL students’ writing and their academic success in the United States. Specifically for U.S higher educational institutions, they are granting international students to the academy on the one hand, but not allowing for diversity and difference in students’ academic writing (Pennycook, 1997). This study can shed light on what universities can do to support Chinese graduate students’ academic success.

This dissertation study aims to respond to the needs of Chinese EAL graduate students in the United States. It specifically explores the academic writing
expectations of Chinese graduate students and how they navigate academic writing expectations in the United States.

This research aims to answer the following questions: How do Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations in U.S. higher education? Specifically I am interested in the following sub questions:

1) What are the new academic writing expectations Chinese EAL graduate students have to understand and meet?

2) What are Chinese EAL graduate students’ experiences of understanding and meeting writing expectations?

3) What strategies and resources do Chinese EAL graduate students use in writing while performing their regular academic writing practices?

I used a qualitative study design to address these questions in my dissertation study because it allows me to explore deeply how Chinese EAL graduate students make sense of and experience academic writing expectations, as well as to understand Chinese graduate students’ goals, interpretation of and relations with writing

**Rationale for the Study**

The target audience for this research project includes Chinese graduate students, staff and faculty in U.S. higher educational institutions, and EAL writing researchers because good academic writing has to be “individually and collectively constructed by teachers and learners in particular settings” (Allison & Wu, 2001, p. 68).

The goal of this dissertation study is to understand Chinese graduate students’ academic writing experience in American universities, to illustrate the complexity of their writing by investigating how they learn and meet academic writing expectations, and to learn possible ways to support them in their writing. Specifically in this dissertation study I limited the study to Mainland Chinese Masters and Doctoral
students who are often hampered in their ability to effectively communicate knowledge and to write academic texts (Benson & Hedish, 1995).

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant in both theory and EAL writing teaching practices. It will provide important information about how Chinese EAL graduate students navigate academic writing in U.S. higher educational institutions. Despite various attempts to study Chinese EAL graduate students’ problems in writing, there is still a lack of research that can address their struggles and provide pedagogical suggestions to EAL learners and instructors. Second, the results of this study can inform curriculum and instructional design practices in graduate programs to prepare international EAL students for the coursework and the graduation requirements. Third, this study can raise Chinese EAL graduate students’ awareness of clarifying academic writing expectations, expose them to what faculty expect from their writing, and motivate them to use various resources and strategies available to meet academic writing expectations and further to achieve academic success. Additionally this dissertation study could lay a foundation for further research on EAL academic writing and international students education.

**Researcher Positionality**

Specifically for me, the desire to study how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations in the United States is informed mainly by my 5-year experience as an EAL Ph. D student in a U.S. graduate program. I experienced academic culture shock and had a very hard start in my writing in the first year. I was constantly shocked by how my writing mismatched my professors’ expectations and the writing conventions in my program. I also came to the realization that most of my professors had no clue how to support me in my writing. Additionally there were not
enough professional development or institutional initiatives available to help my professors understand EAL international students’ writing.

My decision to conduct this study is also influenced by my experience as an English instructor in China for five years and a writing instructor in the United States for three years. All these experiences have exposed me to the challenges faced by EAL users in their English academic writing. As an EAL speaker from “the expanding circle” (Bhatt, 2001, p. 530) and a former English teacher in China, I have experienced English dominance in the academic setting, and the social and cultural nature of academic writing, and I see the significance of unpacking Chinese graduate students’ experience of navigating writing expectations.

I was born and raised in Mainland China, and obtained my Bachelor degree and Masters degree from a Chinese university where English is taught as a foreign language. I came to the United States to pursue doctoral study in 2010. I have worked as a writing consultant and the coordinator of the writing center at my school for three and a half years. I have learned that there are more and more Chinese graduate students using the writing center, and they have explained to me their challenges and concerns in meeting academic writing expectations. However, they expressed their reluctance to share their concerns with their professors because of their relatively low language proficiency and the uncertainty to communicate with a gatekeeper of their writing. Another obstacle for them to communicate with professors was that they were concerned about offending professors with “simple” and “stupid” questions. Some of them also mentioned that they were not sure about the specific expectations of academic writing in the United States because most international students feel the expectations in American graduate programs are different from those in their own country. They are unable to meet the expectations without having a clear picture of
what the expectations are. I am also teaching a course offered to new international students, mainly graduate students from China, and my students have constantly expressed their concerns of not being able to understand and meet expectations in the United States. Additionally, I also came to the realization that the genres of academic writing in U.S. higher education and the role of English writing are different from those in China. Specifically, Chinese college students write an English essay as part of an exam to assess their language proficiency, and their writing focuses on vocabulary, grammar and sentence patterns.

As an educator, I also have learned that it is crucial to promote educators’ and policy-makers’ attention to both Chinese graduate students’ needs and rights in negotiating the unfamiliar demands of academic writing in English. Although the increasing number of Chinese graduate students has been recognized, in my experience as an international student and an instructor of international students, I find that the resources and support for them has not improved enough.

In my dissertation study, my participants likely positioned me as an insider because of my identity as a Chinese graduate student and an instructor who has expectations when teaching international graduate students. In order to make their perspectives visible and amplify their voices, which may include the sharing of their evaluation of their professors, advisors, and the institution, I developed relationships with them and sympathize with them so they feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Additionally at the beginning of each interview, I explained explicitly to all participants my role as the researcher of this study, not as an instructor.

**Overview of the Dissertation**

My dissertation study explores Chinese graduate students’ experience of navigating writing expectations in the U.S., and identifies potential sources and
patterns of writing that can help foster a supportive learning environment for these students.

The second chapter is an extensive literature review of empirical research in four key areas, including research on writing in higher education in general, academic writing of EAL students, writing expectations, and writing of Chinese EAL international students. In the first key area, I briefly review literature on the role of writing in higher education. Sub-areas of investigation in EAL students’ writing include critical thinking and EAL writing, contrastive rhetoric and EAL writing, discipline and content and EAL writing, and peer support and EAL writing. These four aspects are the major lens EAL writing researchers use to understand students’ writing. I then extensively review literature on writing expectations from the perspectives of general writing expectations at graduate level, whose expectations, ways of communicating writing expectations, and the mismatch of expectations in students’ home country and in the U.S. At last I review literature on writing of Chinese international students. I mainly focus on the challenges they face in adapting to U.S. academic culture, and how English writing is taught in China. The second chapter provides strong research warrants for substantiating my claim that the practice of navigating writing expectations is crucial for Chinese students’ academic success in U.S. graduate schools and it is essential to consider their needs in this respect to foster a supportive learning environment. However research on this topic is very thin and more extensive research is needed. This chapter also situates my dissertation study within several fields of study and builds on other researchers’ work to guide my study design.

Chapter three first presents my theoretical framework that underpins the analytic perspectives I take in this dissertation study. Then I outline a qualitative study design
to address my research questions. Specifically I choose to align myself with the pragmatic paradigm (Greene & Caracelli, 1997), and draw on two theoretical domains to inform my study - writing as a social practice as my primary theoretical lens and Bourdieu’s capital theories as the complementary theory. Beginning with the theory of writing as a social practice, I enter into the theoretical discussions of how this theory informed my study of exploring Chinese EAL students’ experience of navigating writing expectations in a new context – U.S. higher education. Then I explain how Bourdieu’s (1991) capital theories further framed my work, where I explore how researchers define capital and related concepts and how they use the concept of capital in studying writing. Then I highlight how my literature review and theoretical framework provide strong warrants that shape my methodology and qualitative study design. Consequently, I describe the research site, participants, sampling strategy and strategies of data collection, data analysis, and exit strategy. Specifically, this study begins with two rounds of semi-structured qualitative interviews with eight Chinese graduate students and then document review of students’ writing samples with their instructors’ feedback, followed by a focus-group interview with faculty who have experience teaching or advising Chinese graduate students. Furthermore, open and focused coding was used to analyze the qualitative data.

In chapter four I interpret the study findings and present three major themes that emerged from my data, including 1) navigating academic culture shock at graduate-level writing, 2) social relations in writing, and 3) resources and strategies Chinese EAL students use to make sense of and meet writing expectations. The first theme is navigating academic culture shock from the perspectives of thinking, freedom and sharing personal feelings. The second theme is navigating social relations with a focus on communicating writing expectations and solving conflicts in writing practices. The
last theme is navigating resources and strategies, focusing on peer support, institutional support and feedback from faculty.

In the last chapter I include the discussions based on the research findings. Implications and limitations of this study are also discussed in the last chapter.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

This chapter explores literature related to the intersection of EAL writing, academic writing expectations, and Chinese graduate students in the United States. It is divided into four major sections. It starts with a brief overview of writing in higher education. Then I critically examine EAL students’ academic writing from the perspectives of critical thinking, rhetorical style, content and discipline, and EAL writers’ peer support in U.S. higher institutions as these four aspects are the major lens EAL writing researchers use to understand EAL students’ writing. The third part focuses on the expectations about academic writing in U.S. higher education, from the perspectives of writing expectations of graduate students, whose expectations to meet, how writing expectations are communicated, and different academic writing expectations in EAL students’ home country and the United States. I then review literature of writing experiences of Chinese EAL graduate students in the U.S. and explain the significance of studying Chinese EAL students’ writing experience, and examine literature on how English writing is taught in China. I conclude with the research gap that, on the one hand, highlights the necessity to carefully study how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations in the United States; on the other hand, not enough scholarship has explored their experience and research on this topic is thin. I claim that research into the ways Chinese graduate students navigate writing expectations in the U.S. draws from multiple scholarly influences and it warrants more research.

Writing in Higher Education

Writing is an essential tool for constructing meaning and disseminating information, and is vital for academic success in higher educational contexts (Ying,
2003). It is also an important means of fostering and demonstrating thinking abilities
(McLaughlin & Moore, 2012). For EAL learners, academic success is closely associated with good writing skills. Along the same lines, Lillis and Scott (2007) argue that academic writing is a “high stakes” activity as problems with writing can result in failing university education.

Writing is a “socio-political process” which takes place in a social context where institutional norms, instructors’ expectations and gatekeeper criteria are highly valued (Casanave, 2003). At postsecondary levels, students are generally expected to “move past obvious or surface-level interpretations and use writing to make sense of and respond to written, visual, verbal, and other texts that they encounter” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, National Writing Project, 2011, p.7). Research has shown that writing at college levels calls upon writers to adapt new ways of knowing, understanding and organizing knowledge (Lea & Street, 1998), to present a writer-based perspective (Flower, 1979), to demonstrate independent learning and thinking, and also to do so as a response through appropriate academic discourse (Graff, Birkenstein, & Durst, 2006).

Additionally English writing is a core activity in academic research (Curry, 2002), and a major means to access, produce, and disseminate knowledge in American and international research communities (Chang & Kanno, 2010).

It is evident in the existing literature that English writing plays a significant role in students’ academic success. However, writing is a complex practice for students and poses many challenges for international EAL students. As argued by Dubley-Evans (1995), writing involves important linguistic skills, such as linguistic forms to express the writers’ purpose, the conversion of the rhetorical and linguistic
awareness into the ability to transform one’s ideas and data into logical “narratives” in the appropriate form expected by the discourse community. Writers are also expected to demonstrate the ability to make critical use of published work and source materials and originality. Adding to the complexity of academic writing to EAL students is that “writing activities are usually self planned, self-initiated and self-sustained” (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997, p.76).

During the past two decades, concerns arose in the field of EAL writing research that focusing only on EAL users’ writing product has failed to consider the learning processes, and the social and cultural contexts in which academic writing happens (Kubota, 1999; Stapleton, 2001). Hence the second language writing field “has expanded from a largely cognitive orientation to include sociocultural approaches” (Zuengler, & Miller, 2006, p. 43).

A rich body of literature has investigated writing strategies and criteria used to evaluate students’ written texts. Researchers like Sionis (1995) argue that students should be aware of efficient EAL writing strategies at different levels, including grammatical-syntactic, pragmatic and lexical levels. Furthermore, Stapleton (2001) proposes the following criteria to evaluate a written text, including arguments, reasons, and evidence that constitute statements or assertions serving to strengthen the augment, recognition of opposition and refutation, and conclusion.

It is recognized that writing plays a significant role in postsecondary education. However, studies have shown that people from different cultures and educational backgrounds tend to write in different ways. For example, in citing Berman and Slobin’s (1994) evidence, Kellerman (1995) presents four versions of the same event interpreted in four different languages -- English, German, Spanish, and Hebrew -- to
illustrate the point that the resources available to speakers of different languages prompt somewhat different representations of the same event in the written form. Kellerman found that the order and manner of writing, the way of addressing a problem, analyzing and reasoning in the writing are cultural-specific, conditioned in part by the linguistic resources and customary modes of perception.

The importance of writing to EAL students’ academic success is omnipresent in the literature. However, as reviewed in this section, writers from various linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds write in different ways, which makes it difficult for EAL international students to navigate academic writing. In the next section, I review literature on academic writing of EAL learners.

**Academic Writing of EAL Learners**

A rich corpus of work shows that EAL students face challenges in academic writing, and academic writing is not easy for EAL writers to explore because it involves thinking, culture, rhetoric, and writing conventions (Benesch, 2008; Stapleton, 2001). English as an Additional Language (EAL) users often struggle to negotiate academic writing in English and often find themselves at a disadvantage when attempting to write critically (Benesch, 2008; Kaplan, 2001; Reid, 1997).

Many researchers in the field of EAL writing have conducted studies in the following areas: voice in EAL users’ writing (Alagozula, 2007; Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003), EAL students’ attitudes towards English writing (Li, 2007), EAL writers’ engagement with the expert members and disciplinary texts in their community of practice (Flowerdew, 2000; Lillis & Curry, 2006), and the conflicting expectations posed by English versus native-language academic communities (Casanave, 1998). In this section, I review literature on EAL students’ academic
writing from the following perspectives: critical thinking, contrastive rhetoric, content and discipline, and peer support in EAL students’ writing.

**Critical Thinking and EAL Students’ Academic Writing.**

There is a rich and increasingly vast body of work exploring academic texts written by EAL international students and their writing experiences. A highly debated topic in EAL users’ academic writing concerns a seemingly culturally constructed notion, critical thinking. Educators and researchers have long put forward arguments for the place of critical thinking (Alagozlu, 2007), along with creativity and originality in EAL students’ academic writing (Allison & Wu, 2013).

Given its current prominence in educational and policy pronouncements it is not surprising that the notion of critical thinking has been raised in a lot of EAL writing research. Critical thinking is a skill that can help writers to think through ideas, problems, and issues; to identify and challenge assumptions; and to explore multiple ways of effectively expressing ideas and building arguments in writing (Atkinson, 1997; Benesch, 2001; Ennis, 1962; Kubota, & Lehner, 2004; McPeck, 1990; Stapleton, 2001). Specifically in American educational settings, critical thinking is important as “writers are asked to move past obvious or surface-level interpretations and use writing to make sense of and respond to written, visual, verbal, and other texts that they encounter” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, National Writing Project, 2011, p.7). Stapleton (2001) proposes the following criteria to evaluate a written text in terms of critical thinking elements, including arguments, reasons, and evidence that constitute statements or assertions serving to strengthen the augment, recognition of opposition and refutation, and
conclusion. In this way, critical thinking is embedded in all aspects of academic writing\(^2\).

Some literature on teaching academic writing to EAL students has presented pedagogical arguments by drawing on cultural differences between EAL students and the targeted academic community, mainly audience in the United States (Kubota, 1999). In studying the relationship between culture and critical thinking in academic writing, some researchers claim that critical thinking is a Western construct and characteristic of middle-class socialization practice in the United States (Atkinson, 1997; Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995). They further argue that native English speakers in the United States often come to the writing tasks having been socialized into “analyzing” problems, with particular “reasoning” strategies that are not only acceptable by their respective cultures, but in ways that are compatible with the linguistic means provided by their languages (Berman & Slobin, 1994).

Some researchers argue that EAL writers, especially Asians, are deficient in critical thinking. One widespread cultural image is that Asian culture promotes deterministic thinking and de-emphasizes critical thinking while Western culture emphasizes critical thinking (Connor & Kaplan, 1987; Raimes & Zamel, 1997). In addition, some scholars have argued that Asian EAL users cannot demonstrate critical thinking skills in their writing and are reluctant to question the textbooks and authorities, and they look to teachers as authority figures because they have been raised under social practices where group harmony and conformity are stressed (Flowerdew & Miller, 1998; Gan, 2009). Along the same lines, they claim that induction to the critical thinking practice for EAL students is difficult given that they are socialized in their respective, culturally valued practices (Connor & Kaplan, 1987).

For more information about college composition standards, see NCTE 2015
http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/writingassessment
The perception of EAL students from Asian cultures having a lack of critical thinking in their writing is not necessarily false, but it is inherently problematic and misleading. Some scholars have suggested that giving stereotypical cultural labels to EAL academic writers is problematic (Gan, 2009; Kubota, 1999; Stapleton, 2002). One study has provided strong empirical support for this contention (Kubota, 1999). Kubota takes Japanese culture as an example to critique taken-for-granted cultural labels of EAL users, especially those from Asian countries. She claims that,

the essentialized cultural label of West-East dichotomy found in the applied linguistic literature parallels the constructed Other in colonial discourse, and the Other itself has taken up the discourse of its cultural uniqueness, indicating their struggle to reclaim identity in the face of increasing Westernization. (p. 30)

A survey of the existing literature reveals some studies have addressed part of the complexity of the relationship between culture and critical thinking of EAL writers. However, a new body of research shows that the issue of critical thinking as demonstrated in EAL students’ writing is more complex, and the criticism that EAL learners do not display such critical thinking abilities like argumentation and reasoning skills is too simplistic (Canagarajah, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 1997; Stapleton, 2002). It is very likely that some scholars who advocate culture-specific critical thinking only seem to touch upon the surface of academic writing by EAL users without understanding it sufficiently, and that there are more factors involved in academic writing under the surface of critical thinking. Canagarajah (2006) further points out “everyone has agency to rise above their culture and social conditions to attain critical insights into their human condition” (p. 101). In other words, whether the EAL users
can display critical thinking ability in their writing does not solely depend on the culture they are from.

Overall, there is a mixed view of EAL learners’ critical thinking ability as demonstrated in EAL students’ academic writing. Some researchers claim that EAL learners, particularly Asian learners, do not display critical thought in their English academic writing, while other researchers claim Asians display critical thinking abilities differently than western learners (Kirkpatrick, 1997; Stapleton, 2002).

**Contrastive Rhetoric and EAL Writing.**

Another major aspect of research into EAL users’ academic writing is contrastive rhetoric. Speakers of different languages write in rhetorically different ways. Initiated by Kaplan (1988), contrastive rhetoric emphasizes cultural differences in rhetorical patterns among various languages. Contrastive rhetoric scholars have also investigated cultural differences in written discourse patterns or rhetorical conventions that might negatively affect academic writing by EAL users. Contrastive rhetoric scholarship studies rhetorical structure across languages to predict the difficulties experienced by students learning to write essays in another language. The paradigmatic contrast is between Western languages, including English, that can exemplify linearity and directness and Eastern languages, Chinese included, which are characterized by nonlinearity and indirectness (Cahill, 2003; Kaplan, 2001).

A large portion of the existing literature on EAL writing reflects the binary model of English language versus other languages. Some scholars have highlighted that EAL students are likely to have less access to rhetorical, pragmatic, and other sociolinguistic means to express themselves appropriately in their academic writing (e.g. Hinkel, 2002; Kaplan, 1972). Specifically, some scholars who have conducted research on rhetorical structures argue that Asian rhetorical structure is characterized
by induction, indirectness, and the use of certain classical styles which contrast with an ideal English rhetoric characterized by deduction, linearity and logic. Specifically in studying Chinese students’ writing, Hinkel (2002) argues that Chinese EAL writers are influenced by Confucian rhetorical style that values greater hedging and diffidence in making arguments, and that they prefer more cautious and indirect argument than people typically expect in the United States. Hinkel’s claim lends support to researchers like Kaplan (1972) who propose that English essays written by Chinese students fail to get to the point and build strong arguments, thus fail to fulfill academic writing expectations. Furthermore, Hinds (1987) views academic papers written by Asian EAL users as manifesting more “reader responsibility” in which the reader, rather than the writer, is responsible for making connections between arguments.

Scholars like Davidson (1998), and Kubota and Lehner (2004) have insightfully argued against the use of contrastive rhetoric in studying EAL students’ writing. Kubota and Lehner (2004) argue that contrastive rhetoric has implicitly “reinforced an image of the superiority of English rhetoric and a deterministic view of second language (particularly English) learners as individuals who inevitably transfer rhetoric oaters of their L1 in L2 writing” (p. 9). Their argument indicates that the criticism of EAL users’ rhetorical styles and critical thinking is misplaced in terms of a lack of questioning of how Western styles are considered superior to other styles without recognizing the strengths of other rhetorical styles.

In studying Chinese EAL graduate students’ academic writing practices specifically, contrastive rhetoric can partly explain the challenges EAL writers are facing in academic writing, but it can be problematic to draw the conclusion that different rhetoric style is the main reason for EAL writers’ challenges in academic

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3 L1 means first language while L2 means second language.
writing. Some scholars have argued that contemporary Chinese students’ writing is still influenced by traditional Chinese text structures that are nonlinear and indirect (Hinkel, 2002). However, Kirkpatrick’s (1997) study on Chinese textbooks reveals the influence of Western writing models, and that English writing of many Chinese students can be more influenced by Western rather than traditional Chinese styles.

The contrastive rhetoric scholarship also fails to address the question that rhetoric style is not static, and it evolves over time. For example, Casanave and Hubbard (1992) argue that as one’s position in a discipline community changes over time, one’s perception of rhetorical style may also change. Stapleton (2002) echoes Casanave and Hubbard by arguing that in Japanese students’ academic writing there is a shift away from rhetorical patterns labeled “indirect, inductive, or circular towards a multiplicity of rhetorical patterns.” (p. 255) He further argues that teachers no longer need to hesitate to introduce deductive rhetorical writing styles to Japanese EAL learners, or perhaps any other group of Asian learners who have been characterized as collectivist, non-critical thinkers. More research has to be conducted to study how EAL users’ critical thinking skills change over time.

Some studies on rhetorical styles of EAL writers focus specifically on EAL users’ ability to express doubt and certainty. Although the ability to express doubt and certainty appropriately has a considerable effect on readers’ assessments of both referential and affective aspects of academic texts (Penneycook, 1996), EAL students generally struggle with conveying statements with “appropriate” degrees of doubt and certainty (Hyland & Milton, 1997). Hyland (2008) further claims that EAL users have difficulties in expressing certainty partly because a single hedging expression in English can convey a range of meanings, and can be expressed in a large variety of ways. The author argues that familiarity with English language can affect EAL users’
ability in making justifiable arguments, and challenges the common consumption that rhetoric style difference between English and other languages is the main reason for EAL writers’ struggles, and extends the research to the topic of language proficiency.

Although some groups of EAL students are criticized for not being able to show certainty and doubt, Hinkel (2002) finds Chinese EAL writers to be more direct and authoritative in tone than English native speakers, while Pennycook (1996) complicates this issue further when he expresses concerns that EAL writers in Hong Kong frequently make unjustifiable strong assertions.

It is not uncommon that some EAL writing researchers assume that “higher or lower use of a particular linguistic feature is a problem to be remedied, rather than simply a different way of meeting the challenge of academic writing” (Leedham, 2014, p. 32). EAL students’ rhetorical style, including their ability to express doubt and certainty, is a complex aspect of EAL students’ writing and warrants more research.

**Content, Discipline, and EAL Writing.**

With the underlying assumption of EAL users’ linguistic and cultural disadvantages in the existing literature, the possibility that their academic writing experience is affected by their knowledge of their discipline and content area has to be pursued. Researchers argue that university students generally have to meet the challenge of writing in conventionalized ways within their disciplinary area in order to achieve success (Hyland, 2008; Lillis, 2001, Prior, 1998) Researchers like Hyland (2005) and Prior (1998) further argue that there is a mass of disciplinary and subdisciplinary variation of academic discourses, which makes it more challenging for EAL students to write academic essays.
One of the most significant findings in EAL writing is that students need a specialized literacy, including the ability to use discipline-specific rhetorical and linguistic conventions to serve their purposes as writers (Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1991). Along the same lines, Leedham (2014) argues “in writing as members of an academic community students are thus learning new discourse practices and adopting new and changing perceptions of themselves as writers” (p. 88).

Hyland (2008), in his study of graduate students’ writing in the disciplines of applied linguistics, biology, business studies and electrical engineering, found that multi-word expression or clusters like “as a result of and as can be seen are familiar to writers and readers who regularly participate in a particular discourse” (p.5). In other words, the use of appropriate clusters could indicate students’ conforming to expected disciplinary conventions. He concludes, “writers in different fields draw on different resources to develop their arguments, establish their credibility and persuade their readers” (p. 20).

Some scholars propose that some writing skills, such as reasoning and argumentation skills, cannot be detached from knowledge in the relevant content area (McPeck, 1990; Resnick & Klopfer, 1989). Resnick and Klopfer (1989) confidently argue that people who are experts on a topic “reason more powerfully about that topic than they do on other topics” (p. 4). They further claim that writers “learn more easily when we already know enough to have organizing schemas that we can use to interpret and elaborate upon new knowledge” (p. 5). In the same vein, McPeck (1990) claims that “there is no set of supervening skills that can replace basic knowledge of the field in question” (p. 9) and “the ingredient that renders any putative solution plausible in the first place is not logic but knowledge and information from within the field or problem area” (p. 16). Along the same lines, Kennedy, Fisher, and Ennis (1991) contend that learners’
familiarity with the writing topics plays an important role in their writing performance. Allison and Wu (2001) raise concerns about two contrasting dangers in academic writing. On the one hand, requiring students to write when they lack sufficient content understanding will lead to regurgitation of bookwork without direction or coherence. On the other hand, postponing student writing when students have adequate knowledge of their content will also postpone writers’ active engagement with content that can stimulate thinking. Embedded in the extant literature is that students’ familiarity with specific content can affect their writing practices.

Research also shows that students in different disciplines experience academic writing in different ways. For instance, Casanave and Hubard’s (1992) survey study reveals that writing skills are crucial to students in the fields of humanities and social sciences throughout their doctoral education, where in the field of science and technology, writing skills become prominent only when they approach the end of their program. Likewise, Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996) promote a discipline-specific approach by claiming that situating writing courses in specific academic disciplines holds greater promise because specific academic disciplines “contain the means of event/problem-analyzing that are more controlled by the paradigms of the discipline and consequently may be somewhat independent of the means, inherent in English or in the students’ first languages, for organizing events” (p. 243). Atkinson (1997) echoes Ramanathan and Kaplan’s claim by suggesting that some skills can only be taught within some specific disciplines, using a cognitive apprenticeship approach or “pan-cultural” (p. 89) approach in which experts and novices work together to learn what skills are needed in some specific contexts. Along the same lines, Hyland (2000) suggests that “the native versus non-native writer distinction’ is replaced by one “emphasizing the variable expertise of novices and experts in particular contexts” (p.
As reviewed in this section, it is widely recognized that content area and discipline can play importance roles in EAL students’ academic writing experience. However, Cooper and Bikoski (2007), after studying the writing requirements in graduate course syllabi in different departments, argue that even though each department has different writing assignments and expectations, all graduate students, regardless of field, need academic writing skills for success in their department and future career. Unlike studying EAL students’ writing from the perspectives of critical thinking and contrastive rhetoric, discipline-specific approaches in studying the EAL students’ academic writing are less affected by “cultural constraints” and have relatively language-neutral ways of analyzing problems according to the “paradigms of the discipline” (Atkinson, 1997; Ramannathan & Kaplan, 1996). In other words, research on EAL graduate students’ writing should not ignore disciplinary variation of writing the role of content area in students’ writing practices. More research should be conducted to understand how EAL writers experience discipline-specific expectations and how they negotiate them in their local writing communities.

**Peer Support and EAL Students’ Writing.**

As reviewed in the previous sections, academic writing is a practice that involves many cultural, social and linguistic elements; hence it is a challenging academic activity for EAL students. The existing research shows that support from peers with the same linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds plays a significant role in international EAL students’ transition into a new academic culture.

Some previous research has focused on the social and emotional influence of peer support (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). For example, Ferris and Hedgcock (2005)
point out that international EAL students frequently feel a sense of social and linguistic isolation from monolingual English-speaking students and the wider community, and they tend to socialize and find solidarity with peers from the same linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds. Likewise, Misra et al. (2003) argue that supportive communication with friends and spouses is useful to release stress and therefore contributes to cross-cultural adjustment.

Peer support also has a buffering effect on international students’ psychological well-being and academic performance (Yamada et al., 2013). Yamada, Klugman, Ivanova and Oborna (2014) highlight the significant role of peer support in international medical students’ academic achievement. They argue “psychological distress and low peer social support may synergistically increase the probability of poor academic self-perception among international medical students” (p. 8). They further claim that promoting peer social relationships at medical school may “interrupt the vicious cycle of psychological distress and poor academic performance” (p. 8). Additionally, peer support provides international students a venue for socialization in their fresh experience of a new country.

Social communication with peers from their home country is also a significant to Chinese EAL students. Previous studies have also found that Chinese international students are less likely to adopt an active learning strategy and are involved in less social interaction with students from other countries (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). This may be related to their cultural characteristics being more collectivistic rather than individualistic, the latter of which is more evident in Western cultures (Watkins & Biggs, 1996).

Specifically in terms of writing, Leki (2006) studied the nuances of the social
interactions of student peers and proposed a notion of socioacademic relationships. Leki found that EAL students capitalized on social networks of peers to facilitate their writing development. Che’s (2013) study focuses on formal and informal peer support in EAL students’ writing development and argues that peer support can bring a genuine sense of audience to encourage a reader-based writing style. Specifically peer support provides “a much-needed emotional outlet for EAL students, simultaneously building and maintaining peer relationships in their writing process” (p. 232). Communication with their peers gives EAL students more approaches to explore writing ideas and to identify proper ways to convey ideas to their audience. Che further argues that when EAL students communicate with their ethnolinguistic peers, common linguistic and cultural practices can lower their apprehension about communicating in English, Consequently they can focus on writing content rather than language, yielding more fruitful discussions.

As reviewed in this section, researchers have mixed view on peer support in EAL students’ writing practices. While peer support helps EAL international students transition into new academic cultures and relieve stress, it can also promote their writing development. In the next chapter, I examine extensively literature on writing expectations and how students, especially EAL graduate students, communicate and meet expectations.

Writing Expectations

To successfully advance in their studies, students must learn and understand their discipline’s expectations, norms and language in their academic writing (Van de Poel, & Gasiorek, 2012). There is a vast body of literature on the expectations about academic writing and on graduate students’ experience of navigating writing
expectations. In this section, I first review studies on academic writing expectations that students and educators cannot safely ignore in higher educational institutions, then go on to explore expectations about academic writing at graduate level, then survey whose expectations are crucial for EAL writers, ways of communicating academic writing expectations and different writing expectations in EAL writers’ home country and the United States.

**Writing Expectations for Graduate Students.**

It is important to note that the academic writing literature provides insights into what expectations graduate students typically have to meet in their writing practices. Casanave (2004) argues, “reader expectations and audience analysis are where we need to begin in many L2 writing classes” (p. 50). Some researchers emphasize that writing instructors and faculty in higher education assume a certain writing style and to expect students’ writing to be easy to read under considerable pressure of time (Farrell, 1997) and they do not easily accept those who use their language and writing style differently (Allen, 1996). Likewise, Canagarajah (1999) argues that lecturers are uncompromising in their expectations that students conform to the dominant norms in academic writing.

In most English-speaking countries, there is an expectation that English academic writing is relevant and logical, demonstrating well-articulated arguments, reasoning and critical thinking (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997). Le Ha (2009) further argues that readers in most English-speaking countries expect that essays must be “organized in a linear and coordinated way that contributes to the readers’ perception of symmetry, order and logical thinking” (p. 135). This confirms Gee’s (1992) claim that people feel that writers need to be “people like us [who] use language, think,
value, and talk in these ways, with these objects at these times and in these places” (p.123).

Specifically in higher education, some researchers have narrowed down the scope of expectations to academic writing and included concrete norms that students have to follow to meet academic writing expectations in U.S. graduate programs (Harwood & Hadley, 2004; Le Ha, 2009). In contemporary higher educational institutions, academic writing expectations generally involve the representation and the questioning of “knowledge” (Allison & Wu, 2001). If EAL writers do not share the knowledge of their audience, they will not be able to predict and fulfill the expectations of that audience. If the “conventions are violated (linguistically, contextually, or rhetorically)” (Reid, 1997, p.130), especially in EAL students’ writing, readers in the discourse community may be puzzled and maybe unwilling to continue reading it. Consequently, studying EAL graduate students’ academic writing experience and how they navigate expectations is significant to students, educators and universities.

However, expectations about academic writing are more complicated than appropriate writing style and language in a specific academic culture. It is problematic for institutions, educators and students to bypass the fact that expectations are socially and culturally situated. Specifically, there are many expectations about academic writing and students generally write in ways that conform to what they think the teachers expect (Lea & Street, 1998) because teachers’ expectations reflect “their perceptions of institutional, professional, international and other external sets of expectations” (Allison & Wu, 2001, p. 68). To facilitate students’ academic writing, writing courses “should be thoughtfully designed to integrate immediate student needs
with the hierarchy of institutional value, disciplinary goals and professorial expectations” (Reid, 2001, p. 144).

Although researchers have highlighted that graduate students have to meet writing expectations, not every graduate student is able to successfully navigate and meet expectations. Harwood and Hadley (2004) propose that students often are given conflicting advice in many ways, such as organization, the use of personal pronouns, and building arguments. Their claim supports Lillis’ (1999) idea that academic writing is an institutional practice of mystery. More research should be conducted to unpack and demystify the expectations about academic writing in graduate programs for EAL students.

**Whose Expectations.**

Graduate students are “neophytes” in the academy who must learn to follow the rules (Harwood & Hadley, 2004). In their academic writing practices, graduate students have to meet expectations from the institution, teachers and other gatekeepers like journal reviewers or expectations from the academy. Faculty, especially graduate students’ advisors, can affect students’ experience of navigating academic writing expectations. Generally student writers have to understand the conventions of their institutions (Lillis & Turner, 2001), the ways in which they are shaped by both the various disciplines, and the particular preferences of individual instructors (Hardy & Clughen, 2012; Lea & Street, 1998)

Research suggests that when graduate students and their advisors’ perceptions of writing match, students are likely to meet writing expectations (Belcher & Braine, 1995; Dong, 1998; Friedman, 1987). For example, Stapleton (2001) stresses that “a lack of shared assumptions and values among individuals can result in one person judging an argument completely logical whereas another finds it fallacious” (p. 518).
In Belcher’s (1994) study of graduate students’ dissertation writing, he found that only when the advisee and the advisor share the conceptualization of their discourse community that their relationship becomes rewarding and satisfying and dissertation writing becomes productive. In other words, in dissertation and thesis writing, graduate students can only achieve success when they are able to meet the writing expectations of their advisors.

Shared understanding of academic writing expectations is especially important for EAL graduate students to achieve academic success in U.S. graduate programs. For example, Friedman (1987) argues that EAL graduate students suffered most when they did not share the expectations of their advisors and when the supervision of their advisors lacked sufficient guidance assistance. Lillis and Curry conducted another study highlighting the significance of meeting expectations (2006). In their study on the “literacy broker” in EAL scholars’ writing practices, they draw on social practice theories of academic literacy and knowledge construction. They define “literacy brokers” as people who influence “successful English-medium academic text production…. Such as editors, reviewers, academic peers, and English-speaking friends and colleagues, who mediate text production in a number of ways” (Lillis & Curry, 2006, p.4). They studied text histories relating to 30 multilingual scholars outside English-speaking countries and identified three key types of brokers, namely “academic, language, and nonprofessional” (p. 29). They argue that “the value of these brokers’ interventions is clearly not primarily at the level of linguistic medium; rather, they influence opportunities for gaining access to English-medium journal publication as well as significantly contribute to the shaping of textual knowledge” (p. 29). Their study shows that meeting the literacy brokers’ expectation is significant for EAL writers to be published. Li (2007) further expands the scope of expectations to norms
from institutions and claims that the novice graduate students’ writing is influenced by the power-infused relationship between the advisee and the advisor who possesses greater expertise and authority.

However, it is very common that there is a mismatch between student and instructor expectations around writing (Lillis & Turner, 2001; Hardy & Clughen, 2012), and this mismatch has affected students’ writing practices and their academic study. Discrepancies between students’ and instructors’ expectations of academic writing may result in poor evaluation of students’ writing, discouragement and even academic failure because they are “routinely evaluated on the basis of their understanding of their academic community’s expectations and practices” (Van de Poel, & Gasiorek, 2012, p. 301).

While it is highlighted in the literature that it is important to meet expectations of gatekeepers in academic writing, especially the expectations from faculty and advisors, some researchers have problematized the expectations about academic writing from gatekeepers because “a dominant norm for expert writers may not be a dominant norm for student writers” (Harwood & Hadley, 2004, p. 360). For example, Hyland and Milton (1997) argue that students’ writing ability to meet academic writing norms is often measured against an unrealistic standard of “expert writer” models such as academic research articles, a genre which is typically rigorously reviewed and revised before publication. They believe that it is especially problematic to assess academic essays written by EAL users based on the criteria used to assess expert writers’ academic texts. However, they didn’t provide any solutions.

Along the same lines, some researchers have expressed the concern that graduate students, especially EAL students, may sacrifice their own voice when they pay too much attention to meeting academic writing expectations (Allison & Wu, 2001;
Harwood & Hadley). By teaching students the dominant discourses, educators are “reinforcing and perpetuating the exclusionary status quo, which is intolerant of differences and excludes non-native speakers, depriving them of their own voices” (Harwood & Hadley, 2004, p. 361). Likewise, Allison and Wu (2001) found that it is necessary to encourage students to express their voices in academic writing, and express concern that students are very keen to write to “meet teachers’ expectations rather than to express a personal stance that they have developed as they approach particular topics” (p. 62). Their assertion is supported by Lea and Stierer (2000) who argue graduate students feel obligated to change their writing styles in different writing assignments to meet different professors’ expectations.

Considerable debate has taken place in recent years over expectation about academic writing that EAL students have to meet. Earlier studies have indicated that EAL students from non-Western cultures and educational backgrounds often face challenges in meeting writing expectations required in U.S. higher education (Casanave, 1998; Casnava, 2002; Qian & Krugly-Smolska, 2008). For example, Leedham (2014) studied instructors’ requirements of students’ writing, and interviews of lectures revealed “a more tolerant attitude towards less than standard expression, and more focus on the ideas than the grammatical accuracy” (Leedham, 2014, p. 115). However, the question of exactly what the expectations about academic writing are for EAL students in graduate programs remains unanswered, and as such, teachers at American universities are left to rely largely on guesswork of what their EAL international students’ needs are and what they can do to help them navigate academic writing expectations. Obtaining detailed information about Chinese graduate students’ writing experience can ultimately lead to better-informed graduate writing instruction and facilitation of Chinese EAL graduate students’ writing.
Communicating Academic Writing Expectations.

In terms of teaching academic writing to EAL writers, many researchers have highlighted the importance of making explicit expectations of writing tasks (Casanave, 2004; Hocking & Toh, 2010; Lillis, 2001). However, the “communication failures” (Haggis, 2006, p. 521) overwriting tasks and their associated confusions and frustrations for both students and faculty are still to be found in contemporary higher education.

Making writing expectations explicit is crucial for EAL students. Faculty should not ignore the fact that international EAL graduate students want and expect their teachers to demystify the academic expectations for them (Belcher & Braine, 1995). Pennycook (1994) argues that educators should “help students to meet the criteria for ‘success’ as they are defined within particular institutional contexts” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 317). Hocking and Toh (2010) also claim that “writing instructions could be complicit in the struggle that second language writers encounter as they attempt to come to terms with the academic writing expectations of their new institutional or disciplinary context” (p. 180).

Many studies have explored the academic writing expectations at the graduate level, and some have focused on how educators and students communicate academic writing expectations. There are some factors influencing how expectations can be communicated effectively, mainly including guidelines in course syllabi (Allison & Wu, 2001) and verbal communication between educators and students (Yan & Berliner, 2009).

While many studies show that course guidelines in graduate courses are useful for students to learn and understand academic writing expectations, some researchers have focused on how to make expectations explicit to EAL students in English writing
courses. For example, Lillis (2001) argues that establishing readers’ expectations through assignment guidelines and discussion with writing instructors should be the primary concern in designing a writing course. Additionally, some researchers have highlighted the significance of incorporating students’ need and the professional expectations in academic writing course guidelines. Reid (2001) argues that academic writing courses “should be thoughtfully designed to integrate immediate student needs with the hierarchy of institutional values, disciplinary goals and professional expectations” (p. 144). However, following some specific guidelines closely does not necessarily help students to understand academic writing expectations and perform better in academic writing tasks (Allison & Wu, 2001).

EAL students often face obstacles in understanding academic writing expectations in U.S. graduate programs partly because professors in different disciplines have different criteria of what constitutes good academic writing, which makes meeting academic writing more challenging for EAL graduate students. According to Crusan (2001), when assessing students’ writing, professors in the medical field rank grammatical correctness as one of the most important standards whereas conciseness and clarity are the most valued features of good writing to faculty in business schools.

Complicating the issue of understanding academic writing expectations to EAL users further are two related facts. First, some faculty and writing instructors are unaware of EAL students’ needs (Matsuda, Saenkhum & Accardi, 2013). Matsuda, Saenkhum and Accardi (2013) found that even though writing teachers can recognize the presence of EAL students in their writing class, they fail to make any special provisions to address the unique needs of EAL writers in their classes. They also found that teachers’ ability to address L2 writers’ needs were “constrained by program
policies, lack of common teaching and assessment materials, and professional preparation opportunities” (p. 68). Their findings corroborate Ferris, Brown, Liu and Stine’s (2011) claim about the lack of professional preparation among writing instructors. Additionally, many faculty are not aware of EAL students’ needs because they do not perceive writing instruction as their responsibility and they only focus on the final products of writing instead of supporting EAL graduate students in the process of understanding and navigating writing expectations (Salem & Jones, 2010).

Second, although EAL graduate students in the United States are often evaluated on the basis of their understanding of their academic community’s expectations of writing, they struggle to understand the expectations and they generally need more explicitly stated expectations than native English speaking students (Allison & Wu, 2001). Hence faculty should make their expectations explicit to students, especially to EAL students. However, “the process of making expectations explicit is not easy, and will require time and suitable provision for extended spoken or email consultation and discussion” (Allison & Wu, p. 67). Consequently, asking for teachers’ feedback and consultation for a clear understanding of writing expectations becomes crucial.

Studies also show that faculty’s attitudes towards EAL writers affect their writing assessment. Some researchers argue that teachers prefer students whose writing reflects mainstream cultural values rather than those who demonstrate alternative ethnocultural values (Tyler, Boykin & Walton, 2006). Many previous studies have shown that educators tend to rate EAL writers differently from native English speakers. Additionally, EAL users may be aware of the difference, and feel frustrated when they feel their writing is underestimated (Kobayashi & Rennert, 1996; Lindsey & Crusan, 2011). For example, to understand how faculty perceive student writers based on their nationalities, Lindsey and Crusan (2011) surveyed and interviewed
faculty in several U.S. universities and found that faculty rated international student writers lower than writing by native speakers when scoring analytically, but they evaluated those same writers higher when scoring holistically. This reinforces the point that professors should make their standards of good writing explicit to EAL students.

The existing literature reveals that the way faculty and students communicate writing expectations is important for EAL graduate students to meet the expectations and to further achieve academic success. However, most studies explore this topic from the perspective of faculty. More research should be conducted to understand students’ experience of communicating expectations.

**Different Expectations in EAL Students’ Home Countries and the U. S.**

While it may not be easy for most graduate students to understand and meet academic writing expectations, EAL graduate students often struggle more than their native-speaking peers to navigate expectations for academic writing (Crusan, 2010). Scholarship in second language writing has repeatedly indicated that EAL graduate students are disadvantaged in their academic writing and they face daunting obstacles in accommodating dominant writing norms in the United States and in meeting expectations in their English writing (Lindsey & Crusan, 2011).

It is widely recognized that EAL students face obstacles in terms of their language proficiency level and the resulting obstacles, such as the organization of essays. Academic writing requires a considerable amount of language competence to meet the expectations, especially when the language is used as a second language (Van de Poel, & Gasiorek, 2012). For example, Kubota (1998) used both quantitative evaluation and interviews to investigate whether individual Japanese EAL students used the same discourse pattern in Japanese and English writing, and found that
students’ English proficiency, and writing experience in English affect the quality of EAL participants’ English essays. Specifically, their lack of lexical and syntactic control in English prevented EAL students in this study from meeting Western academic writing expectations in terms of organization, using effective coherence devices, and interpreting the prompt correctly in their English writing.

EAL graduate students may face challenges grasping the different writing expectations in their own country and in the United States. For example, Hocking and Toh (2010) argue that there is a disjuncture between EAL students’ prior and present academic writing expectations, which contribute to the struggles faced by EAL writers as they “attempt to reconcile the voices of the writing classes with the subsequent demands of their academic courses” (p. 162). They also argue that knowledge of the audience is the central component of many EAL writers’ prior writing processes and practices, but it leads to “confusion due to their lack of information about audience in their new academic context in the United States” (Hocking & Toh, 2010, p.167). Furthermore, many graduate students, especially EAL students, feel they “had not been explicitly taught how to write academically and had taught themselves, often following enrolment in a postgraduate course.” (Feedham, 2014, p.112) In other words, EAL writers may understand that they are writing for their community of practice, but misjudging the expectations of the readers may result in a less than positive evaluation of their writing.

The academic writing expectations in the United States can be different from those in EAL students’ home countries in terms of writing guidance. Both Friedman (1987) and Dong (1998) have proposed the notion of culturally varied expectations from advisors and advisee in students’ academic writing, especially in their dissertation or thesis writing. Dong claims that some EAL graduate students,
especially those from Asian cultural and educational backgrounds expect more
guidance and direct assistance from their advisors in dissertation or thesis writing than
students from the U.S. Along the same lines, Leedham (2014) argues that to help
Chinese EAL students succeed in their academic study, “recognizing that the students’
expectation for the type of writing required may differ from the lecture’s expectations
is a further crucial step in the process of demystification of academia” (p. 128).

Some researchers have studied the different expectations from the perspective of
writing style. For example, Lindsey and Crusan (2011) argue that EAL students from a
culture that values an indirect writing approach may put the argument at the end of
their papers. However, their writing may be downgraded by a professor who expects
the argument to appear early in the writing. In another study on EAL students’
academic writing, Lindsey and Crusan (2010) argues that even EAL students with a
good mastery of English grammar may still struggle to meet academic writing
expectations if they organize an argument substantially differently from their
instructors.

The different writing expectations about writing can also result from different
instructional focuses in EAL students’ home country and the United States. To study
the reasons why some Asian EAL students face challenges in argumentative EAL
academic writing, Kubota and Lehner (2004) emphasizes the difference of writing
instructions methods in Eastern and Western countries by arguing that the English
writing instruction focus in most Asian countries is on sentence-level accuracy, which
may result in the lack of the cultivation of other skills that are valued in the United
States.

In one word, the existing literature suggests that a large body of scholarship
started to look at the discrepancy of academic writing expectations between EAL
graduate students’ home country and the United States. However, how these different expectations affect students’ academic writing experience warrants more research.

**Academic Writing of Chinese EAL International Students**

Before delving into surveying literature on Chinese EAL graduate students’ academic writing experience, it is necessary to highlight the importance of studying transitions of Chinese international students in the United States and how English writing is taught in China. Higher educational institutions and faculty should understand Chinese international students’ experience and further support their successful academic experience in the U.S. because of the increasing number of Chinese students and their contribution to U.S. universities academically and financially (Gaule & Piacentini, 2013; Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2010).

**Academic Culture Shock of Chinese EAL Students.**

Although many studies have demonstrated that Chinese EAL students face challenges in the United States, their needs and struggles are often ignored because of the image of them as well adjusted and high achieving students (Yan & Berliner, 2009). In other words, evidence on Chinese graduate students’ writing experiences in the United States, especially how they navigate writing expectations, is very thin and warrants more research.

Chinese international students are described as high academic achievers, but they also face many challenges in the new environment in the United States (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Chinese international students generally suffer from “academic culture shock” (Gilbert, 2000). Academic culture shock is a subset of culture shock and “is a case of incongruent schemata about higher education in the students’ home country and in the host country” (p. 14). Academic culture shock is directly associated with the learning environment of an academic institution, including the educational
The different expectation about academic writing in the U.S. is a major academic culture shock Chinese EAL graduate students face in the United States (Dong, 1998). The major challenges they face in academic writing include the lack of social networks, being unaware of the available resources that they can use to help with their writing, and the lack of support from faculty (Dong, 1998). As Dong argues, to support Chinese graduate students to transition into and stay in U.S. graduate programs, “the university, the department, and postgraduate advisors [have to] join forces to initiate helping networks and to provide other resources” (p. 387).

While it is not easy for many students to understand and navigate writing in the U.S, specifically for Chinese graduate students, the process is more complicated in that the professor-student relationship in China is different from that in American universities. Hu (2002) claims that the teacher-student relationship in China is always hierarchical but harmonious. Hu’s (2006) study offers insights into the teacher-student relations in English learning culture in China. Hu argues that English teachers in China hope to transmit the required materials to most of the students and answer individual students’ questions promptly after class so they would answer students’ questions after class rather during class. It is very common in China that instructors offer students guidance on academic matters, even after class. Hence Chinese students may expect the same availability from all their instructors and see efforts to promote autonomous learning as “uncaring” (Leedham, 2014, p. 19).

A group of researchers also point out that academic writing might be challenging to Chinese students because, influenced by Confucius philosophy, Chinese students are less provocative than students from Western cultures in coping with disagreements.
in writing. Specifically, Carson and Nelson (1996) compared the differences between
Chinese and U.S. students during peer studies in a writing class and found that
Chinese students generally avoided criticizing their peers’ writing or claiming any
authority. Additionally they would maintain the harmony of the group rather than
being critical of peers’ writing. To add to the complexity to the issue, Durkin (2011)
argues that “in oral debate, Chinese students will tend to empathize with the other
participants, and to reject or challenge ideas is to risk a personal insult to the
originators of these ideas” (p. 278). Furthermore, Durkin (2011) argues that adopting
an identity of individualism is a foreign notion to Asian EAL students who are raised
in a culture that values a collective, relational sense of self-identity, and involves a
reversal of acceptance, “face” and politeness behavior.

Similarly, in Angelova and Riazantseva’s (1999), EAL students were aware that
the U.S. educational system required students to interpret assignments actively, and
have constant interaction with professors or knowledgeable others for clarification of
ideas. However, these expectations of interaction with people became a barrier to their
EAL participants who were new to their programs. EAL international students in their
study reported in their home cultures, they were taught not to bother or challenge
professors with many seemingly “stupid” questions. Consequently, many of them
were reluctant to consult professors on their written assignments. Hu (2006) also
argued that Chinese students are self-critical about their studies and tend to blame
themselves for not performing well. Along the same lines, McPharrel (2011) found
that when he asked Chinese students in his study to evaluate his teaching, students
offered suggestions on his class as a whole, but none of them openly disagreed with
any methods of instruction or his class.
The academic culture shocks faced by Chinese graduate students in English writing do not mean that they cannot meet expectations. Instead, as EAL students widen their linguistic repertoire and become more familiar with the expectations of English academic writing, they can broaden their range of linguistic skills to meet the writing expectations (Leedham, 2014).

**English Writing Teaching in China.**

To understand Chinese graduate students’ writing experience in the U.S. and to further examine how they navigate writing expectations, it is important to understand how writing is taught in China.

Researchers have found that the educational system plays a big role in students’ writing training. English teaching in China is shaped by the test-oriented educational system. Under the high-stakes national college entrance examination - Chinese Gaokao\(^4\) system, the English test functions as a gatekeeper of selecting qualified college students. Instead of encouraging a “process” approach towards writing, the English test in Gaokao emphasizes the multiple-choice sections of the test (Leedham, 2014). Consequently, most English courses involve “choral drilling of new words and painstaking analysis of sentence patterns but barely entail discussion of textual content” (Leedham, 2014, p. 26). Hence students focus on word-for-word translation.

To make sure students are prepared to do multiple choices in English tests, English teachers in China have to focus on drilling instead of providing feedback on longer stretches of writing. The pressure from Gaokao not only shaped the way English is taught in China, but also influenced students’ perception of good English teachers. For example, Shi (2006) surveyed some high school English learners in China about their

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\(^4\) Gaokao: Gaokao, or National College Entrance Exam is a prerequisite for entrance into almost all higher education institutions at the undergraduate level in Mainland China. Students usually take it in their last year of high school.
criteria for being a good English teacher. Students listed providing clear and comprehensive notes, improving students’ language skills and a light-hearted teaching style as the top criteria. About half of the respondents thought a good English teacher should be able to help them pass English exams, but not many respondents gave priority to teachers’ ability to teach them how to write in English.

Even at postsecondary levels, English tests determine how English is taught. Specifically all students have to take College English Test Band 4 to obtain a Bachelors degree. According to *College English Curriculum Requirements* (2007), “freshmen take a computer-based placement test upon entering college to measure their respective starting levels, such as Grade 1, Grade 2 or Grade 3” (p. 8). For students in the “basic requirement” group, they should be able to

Complete writing tasks for general purposes, e.g., describing personal experiences, impressions, feelings, or some events, and to undertake practical writing. They should be able to write within 30 minutes a short composition of no less than 120 words on a general topic, or an outline evaluation. (p. 12)

A rich body of literature on how English teachers has tried to transform English teaching in China. While some were successful, most recognized the constraining factors in adopting new teaching approaches, including a lack of qualified teachers, crowded classrooms, and the Confucian concept of viewing teachers as knowledge holders who should not be challenged (Zheng & Davison, 2008).

Taught in the Gaokao system, students are not prepared for graduate level English writing in the U.S. Although students who choose to pursue further study in an “inner circle” English speaking country (Kachru, 2006) take tests like TOEFL and IELTS, these tests can not be taken as an indication of students’ readiness for graduate
study because students will cram for the tests and memorize model answers (Leedham, 2014).

“Academic freedom” is a major motivation for Chinese EAL students to pursue graduate study in Western countries (Zhang, 2011). However, when they start their academic study in English speaking countries, they experience academic culture shock, especially in understanding autonomy in writing. For example, Leedham (2014) found that some Chinese students, especially those in engineering, “don’t know where to start” in writing and “find (the) open-ended nature hard” (p. 117). Furthermore, researchers like McPherron (2001) find that Chinese students often try to incorporate “beautiful words” into academic writing wherein students employ popular Chinese proverbs or include a “moral” tale. Many Chinese EAL students also found writing “different from that experienced previously with a variety of genres of assignments expected, in comparison with the dominance of short answers and traditional written essays in China” (Leedham, 2014, p. 38). Hence it is hard for Chinese EAL students to adjust to an educational environment that is “more characterized by independent learning and less instructor supervision and guidance” (Smith & Smith, 1999, p. 66).

In sum, Chinese students are a unique group from a culturally distinctive background and they are different than other international students in many ways (Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2010). As reviewed in this section, Chinese EAL international students who are taught English in a test-oriented educational system, generally face academic culture shocks in the U.S., and face different writing expectations in the U.S. However, “It is harmful to put Chinese students on one side of a binary division and western students on the other, because this kind of division implies using “ideal” western students as models to compare with Chinese students” (Shi, 2006, p. 139).
Research Gap

Although the existing literature has generated significant insights into the academic writing experience of EAL users, Chinese international students included, and their experiences of navigating academic writing expectations, it has presented an incomplete and biased picture of their experience in English academic communities. First, although there is a rich body of work exploring the challenges of meeting academic writing expectations faced by EAL students, little research has delved into the variation of international students from different nations. Most of the extant research studies EAL writers as a whole group without taking Chinese graduate students’ specific backgrounds into consideration. International graduate students are a heterogeneous group with differences in political status, home culture, learning environment and past educational background. Specifically, whereas much cross-cultural research has been conducted on Asian EAL learners, especially Japanese, Chinese, and Korean students, only a few studies have focused on Chinese graduate students in an American educational context. More attention has to be paid to a bigger group of Chinese graduate students to have a better understanding of their experience of navigating academic writing to facilitate their success in the new academic culture in the United States.

Second, while a significant amount of research has been done on the academic writing experience of EAL users, little has been done on what can be done to help Chinese EAL learners in meeting American academic writing expectations which are different from the expectations in their home country. Although the scholarly literature on Chinese students’ writing have made invaluable contributions to the educational scholarship on critical pedagogy and EAL education, they have offered little empirical
study on helping EAL users to develop academic texts that meet expectations and understand their writing process instead of focusing on their writing products.

Third, the existing literature has demystified part of the intricacies of EAL graduate students’ academic practices, the interactions between graduate students and more experienced members in their communizes, and the role of advising relationships in EAL students writing success. However, as a whole they did not document what new expectations EAL graduate students have to meet in the new writing community and how that affect their writing practices. Additionally, the existing literature generally focus on identifying EAL graduate students’ writing “problems”, and offering remedial strategies instead of understanding their experiences. In other words, EAL students’ perspectives and their experiences are generally not included in EAL writing research.

**Conclusion**

Academic writing holds the future of the Chinese EAL students in U.S. graduate programs because their academic achievement is “significantly predicated by good English writing skills” (Ying, 2003, p. 470). Hence it is necessary to carefully study how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations, how academic writing expectations in the Unite States differ from those in China, what challenges students face in meeting writing expectations, and what resources and strategies they can use to meet expectations. Given the increasing number of Chinese graduate students who are engaged in English academic writing in the United States and their continuous struggle in meeting writing expectations in their academic community, more research need to be conducted on challenges facing EAL students in their writing in general and in meeting expectations in particular.
To date, no empirical research has focused solely upon understanding how
Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations in the United
States. Given that Chinese graduate students represent the largest number of
international graduate students in the United States, and they contribute to the
intellectual pool to increase academic productivity, and that they encounter challenges
in their academic writing, it is worth developing a deeper understanding of how they
perceive their academic writing and how they navigate academic writing expectations.
Research is needed to understand the specific academic writing experiences from
students’ perspective, and to inquire into what strategies and resources Chinese
graduate students use to meet these expectations. Such research could help Chinese
graduate students make informed decision in their writing practices and could help
faculty and institutions adjust to their largest group of international students. My study
attempts to bridge the gaps in the literature by examining Chinese graduate students’
writing practices, especially how they navigate writing expectations, and exploring the
new academic culture in the United States.

In this chapter, I have examined the literature on how EAL academic writing,
academic writing expectations, and EAL graduate students’ experience of
understanding and navigating academic writing expectations. This review has
surveyed literature related to the intersection of academic writing expectations and
EAL writing education, with the goal of understanding the academic writing
expectations in U.S. graduate programs and how Chinese graduate students navigate
these expectations. While a growing body of research has set out to investigate
English academic writing by EAL users, little writing for academic purpose or literacy
research has examined how EAL graduate students navigate the expectations that are
different from those in their home culture. Drawing on the literatures on both
academic writing and EAL education, this dissertation aim to study EAL learners’
academic writing experience and look for strategies to address the question of how to
support Chinese graduate students in their writing practices.
Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Epistemological Stance

As reviewed in the previous chapter, the existing literature has studied EAL students’ academic writing from many perspectives, such as contrastive rhetoric, disciplinary difference and academic culture shocks. However, research on EAL students’ academic writing in general, and Chinese EAL graduate students in particular from the sociocultural lens is thin and warrants further study. Additionally more research should explore the academic writing experience from the students’ perspective.

This chapter begins with an overview of the theoretical framework - writing as a social practice as the primary theoretical lens, and Bourdieu’s (1991) different forms of capital as the supplementary one, which is informed by my epistemological stance. Then I present details of the methodology that grounds my study, the purpose of which is to explore how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations in U.S. higher education institutions. I begin with my research questions, followed by an explanation of this qualitative research study design and analytic framework. I then provide a detailed description of the research site of the study, my data collection strategies and sources, and participant sampling strategy. After detailing my plans for data analysis, I discuss the ethical considerations and criteria for trustworthiness.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework in my dissertation study draws on social practice theories (Gee, 1992; Lave & Wegner, 1991; Street, 2003) and Bourdieu’s (1991) social and cultural capital theory. The social practices theory and social and cultural capital theory share a common understanding that writing is a social and cultural practice, which is applied as the conceptual base to the theoretical framework in this
dissertation study. Viewing academic writing of EAL students as a social practice brings writing out of the cognitive skills model and into the social context. From this formulation, researchers of EAL academic writing have provided a powerful tool for understanding how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations from the sociocultural tradition. Thus social practice theory can shed light on my dissertation study of how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations. Likewise, the advantage of the notion of capital allows researchers to view academic writing of ESL learners from the perspectives of capital instead of only cognitive skills. These two theories problematize EAL students’ academic writing as practice that has a social aspect. Thus, the notions of capital and social practice are closely tied to academic writing and expectations from the sociocultural perspectives. These notions will enable me to contextualize EAL students’ writing practice in the US social and cultural contexts.

During the past few decades, concerns arose in the field of EAL writing research that the focus on EAL users’ writing products failed to consider their learning processes and the social and cultural contexts in which academic writing happens (Kubota, 1999; Stapleton, 2001). Specifically, some researchers are problematizing cognitive theories in understanding EAL students’ academic writing and proposing a sociocultural lens. Cognitive theories focus on students’ writing skill and their written text while ignoring that student should be the “agents” in their learning and writing practices (Flower, 1989). On the contrary, social practice and capital theories emphasize that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed and imbued with relations of power (Bourdieu, 1991; Lave, & Wenger, 1991; Gee, 1992). In other words, a learner best acquires the needed expertise by participating in specific learning activities in social and cultural contexts.
In this section, I examine social practice theory and the notions of cultural and linguistic capitals to provide a theoretical perspective for analyzing the academic writing practices of EAL users, especially their experience of navigating academic writing expectations. Specifically, I begin each part with an overview of a theoretical approach in the order of social practices and capital, mainly cultural capital and linguistic capital. In each part, I provide an analysis of how each theory has been or can be used to inform the study of EAL learners’ academic writing experience, especially how they navigated writing expectations. I also include examples of how researchers have used social practice theory and Bourdieu’s social and cultural capital theory in their studies and demonstrate how these two theories mutually reinforce one another toward a comprehensive understanding of EAL users’ academic writing practices. Finally, I describe how the two theories work together to form a framework through which to view the issue I am studying. I highlight how social practice and capital theories support my epistemological point of view as they provide an understanding of the social and cultural processes and interactions that take place in EAL users’ writing practices.

**Social Practice Theory.**

Here I discuss the social practice theory that frames my study and that I use to approach and understand expectations of academic writing. Specifically, I discuss social practices from the perspectives of legitimate peripheral participation and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and analyze how social practice theory provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the writing practices of EAL students in U.S. higher educational contexts.

Before delving into social practice theory, I discuss the meaning of practice. According to Scribner and Cole (1981), practice is referred to as, “socially developed
and patterned ways of using technology and knowledge to accomplish tasks…[which]
constitute a social practice when they are directed to socially recognized goals and
make use of a shared technology and knowledge system” (p. 236). EAL writing
researchers, including Fujioka (2014), argue that in graduate level EAL writing
studies, the notion of writing has been expanded beyond consideration of texts to that
of writing as practice.

Social practice theorists view many aspects of communication, including
reading and writing, as fundamentally social practices (Gee, 1992; Street, 2003).
Social practice theorists also view writing as a practice in contrast to the traditional
understanding of writing as a technique or skill, particularly in the field of writing of
EAL users. Social practice is a theoretical concept emphasizing that knowledge is
socially constructed (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Several decades ago, Piaget realized
that “individual independence is a social act, a product of civilization” (Piaget, 1977,
as cited in Rogoff, 1991, p. 34). Along the same lines, Lave and Wenger (1991)
expand the theoretical content with the notions of legitimate peripheral participation
and communities of practice. They argue that learning is a process of changing
participation in a community of practice and focus on the social and situated nature of
learning. “Legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 27)
describes the changes of engagement in particular social practices that entail learning.
This idea can be used to understand Chinese graduate students’ change from limited to
fuller participation in social practices involving their academic writing in U.S. higher
education contexts, and to understand their experience of being socialized into more
appropriate central participation in the social practices of their communities as they
navigate writing expectations.
Furthermore, Lave and Wenger (1991) note that novice learners generally start with limited participation in the community practices or start engaging in practices that are less central to the practices of their community and then change their participation to engage in increasingly more central practices. In other words, it is an apprenticeship model. This apprenticeship model can help learners conceptualize “learning in situated ways - in the transformative possibilities of being and becoming complex, full cultural-historical participants in the world” (p. 32). EAL graduate students’ academic writing practice in the United States often mirrors this model of learning. Novice academic writers – EAL graduate students -- develop their expertise and professional identity with increasing participation in the social practices in their community comprised of people with different levels of expertise in academic writing and U.S. academic culture. By interacting with other community members and apprenticing with more experienced native English speaking learners, newcomers who speak English as an additional language gradually develop their competence in English writing (Chang & Kanno, 2010).

Street (2003) considers literacy as social practice or rather as a set of social practices, comprising such constructs as practices, events, and texts. Street’s idea of social practices of literacy represents a new tradition that focuses “not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice” (Street, 2003, p. 1). Students’ writing in graduate education is literacy practice in the context of the institutional community of discourse, and in the domain of academic literacy. Brandt (1990) argues that literacy is “not the narrow ability to deal with texts, but the broad ability to deal with people” (p. 14).
Gee (1992) describes the connections between social practice and discourse communities. Gee calls the various social groups of people with similar interests, goals and activities “discourse communities” (p. 107). People belong to and engage in various social practices of their discourse communities. He further claims that meaning is something “embedded in social practices within which various groups of people talk, think, and act out their cultural models of mind” (p. 51). Additionally, Gee claims social practices vary across cultures, and that they “are constituted by the characteristic ways in which culturally, socially, and historically defined groups of people talk about, interact over, appreciate, and evaluate memories” (p. 89). In addition, he claims that “the social practices themselves are each seen as a particular Discourse, and thinking, with associated objects, settings, and events, which are characteristic of people whose social practice it is” (p. 91). Gee’s ideas of social practices and discourse can be used in studying Chinese EAL graduate students’ experience of navigating writing expectations, and its relation to social, cultural and historical contexts. Specifically in my study, Chinese EAL students, when engaged in a new discourse community, are influenced by the expectations from their social groups.

Social practice theory emphasizes the value of the linkages in social relations and thus helps us theorize the impact of social factors on learning and development. How Chinese EAL students navigate academic writing expectations involves social relations, thus social practice theory can be used productively in my dissertation study. Specifically, in the context of higher education, academic writing can be understood as a social practice because on the one hand, writing is “embedded within relationships around teaching and learning”, while on the other hand, students are learning not only to communicate in particular ways, but are learning how to “be particular kinds of
people; that is, to write as academics” (Lave & Wegner, 1991, p. 10). Additionally, the notion of academic writing as a practice signals that writing does not “exist in isolation;” instead, it is “bound up with what people do-practices- in the material, social world” (p. 12). Likewise, Maybin (2006) argues that people’s social practices reveal and produce “macro-level complexes of language, knowledge, and power” (p. 4), and organize how people think and act.

It is crucial to emphasize that “social practices are *not* a magic set of “methodologies” (Gee, 1992, p. 124), and that students from different social groups use language in different ways. Writing is a dialogic process and a means of social action that involves multiple social and cultural interactions and processes (Prior, 2006). Theories of writing, therefore, needed to consider students’ diverse writing practices and experiences in broader sociocultural and political contexts (Sperling & Freedman, 2001). Using the notion of practice in studying writing can also offer “a powerful way of conceptualizing the link between the activities of writing and the social structure in which they are embedded and which they help to shape” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Using social practice theory specifically to understand how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations offers a way of linking language with what individuals, as socially situated actors, do both at the level of the “context of situation” and at the level of “context of culture” (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 7).

In summary, viewing writing as a social practice opens up the issues of how social and cultural factors exert their influence on individual writing activity (Braceywell & Witte, 2007). Social practice theory offers a comprehensive lens in understanding Chinese EAL graduate students’ academic writing experience and how they navigate writing expectations. However, multiple theoretical frameworks are
necessary in order to understand the diverse experiences of Chinese graduate students in American higher educational institutions since they are from distinct and non-Western cultural and social backgrounds. Incorporating various perspectives in the research on Chinese EAL students’ writing practices can provide researchers great insight into EAL users’ social and cultural experiences in navigating writing experience.

The notion in social practice theory of viewing academic writing as a practice is echoed in Bourdieu’s theory social and cultural capital. In the next section, I discuss Bourdieu’s (1991) theory of social and cultural capital, and analyze the connection between social practice theory, and how they complement each other in studying Chinese graduate students’ academic writing experience in the United States.

**Bourdieu’s Theory of Social and Cultural Capital.**

Social practice theory is fundamental for understanding another key theory used in studying EAL learners’ writing experience—Bourdieu’s (1991) theory of different forms of capital. Theoretical discussion on cultural capital and linguistic capital have provided me with an important lens to explore EAL users’ academic writing practices because EAL students use “various forms of capital at their disposal” (Chang & Kanno, 2010, p. 674) to participate in their communities of practice. The idea of capital provides me with the theoretical lens to look into the social and cultural contexts of EAL users’ academic writing and how EAL users activate their various forms of capital in their environments to accomplish learning.

Although Bourdieu’s concept of capital is not specific toward examining academic writing of EAL users, it offers significant means for understanding the role of various capitals in EAL students’ writing practices. The social practice theory and Bourdieu’s capital theories can complement each other and provide a comprehensive
framework for my dissertation study. In this section, I discuss Bourdieu’s theory of different forms of capital, mainly cultural capital and linguistic capital, and how they can be used to complement social practice theory to study Chinese graduate students’ academic writing experience, especially how they navigate writing expectations in the United States.

According to Bourdieu (1991), capital refers to material and nonmaterial resources that confer power to people, including the knowledge, skills and disposition that can be used by people to successfully negotiate some aspect of their social existence. The major forms of capital include economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Although all forms of capital could be useful in studying how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations in the United States, in this study I focus on social, cultural and linguistic capital because EAL students, when practicing English academic writing in the U.S. educational context and navigating writing expectations, cannot escape from the norms of the dominant linguistic and cultural circles (Canagarajah, 2002). Additionally, the existing literature has used social, cultural capital and linguistic capital as a comprehensive lens in studying students’ writing experience. Grounded by a critical paradigm and Bourdieuan analysis, capital frameworks can offer comprehensive and unique lenses in studying Chinese EAL students’ writing from the perspectives of cultural and linguistic capitals.

**Cultural Capital.**

Cultural capital is knowledge that enables an individual to interpret various cultural codes and participate in a given field of practice (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital consists of investment in a set of symbols and meanings reproduced by the dominant class of a society (Bourdieu, 1986) and passed down, or reproduced, through
generations. The reproduction of cultural capital serve to include or marginalize individuals in society that in turn leads to unequal social and economic rewards. However, Bourdieu’s conceptualization of cultural capital has changed over time from “class-based dispositions and attitudes” to “formal knowledge, previous academic experience and educational qualifications” (Lamont & Lareau 1988, as cited in Chang & Kanno, 2010, p.674).

Some researchers have used Bourdieu’s concept of different forms of capital to study EAL users’ academic writing. For example, Chang and Kanno (2010) used cultural capital to study EAL doctoral students’ academic writing in the United States. They argue that in their study, EAL doctoral students’ participation in their disciplinary community depends on what capitals they have available and how they make use of them in their learning. Their study reveals that participating EAL students were aware of the different kinds of cultural capital that Taiwanese EAL students and American students possessed, and that the Taiwanese EAL students did “less well in the areas of critical and creative thinking skills” (p. 681). They found that EAL students were able to make use of their unique cultural capital to “claim legitimate membership in their disciplinary communities” (p. 698), and they readily acknowledged their “otherness” because of their linguistic and cultural differences. Despite their differences in terms of linguistic capital, EAL students in this study knew that they “possessed the kinds of cultural capital that had high market value in their disciplines” (p. 689) and they felt that they were nonetheless legitimate members of their disciplinary communities because they have other cultural and linguistic capital that enabled them to display enough competence in their communities. This study shows that researchers should note that EAL students might have some specific cultural capital that can support their academic writing practices in the United States.
Curry (2007) also emphasizes the influence of cultural capital on EAL users in their writing. Curry draws on cultural capital theory to study how students navigated community college writing classroom. She argues that cultural capital encompasses “spatial competence,” “classroom participation competence,” “curricular competence,” and “institutional competence” (p. 280) for students at the community college. She found that immigrant students with higher previous educational attainment levels benefit from drawing on the cultural capital that “can help them negotiate the practices of the community colleges” (p. 279). She also argues that, “the constructs of cultural capital and habitus are particularly useful for understanding the issues facing globally mobile students, who must often leave behind the structural benefits of their social class position to enter new contexts” (p. 282). In my study, EAL users used their cultural, linguistic and social capitals to understand and navigate academic writing expectations in a new discourse community in U.S. graduate schools, so it will offer a comprehensive lens for me in my dissertation study.

**Linguistic Capital.**

Linguistic capital is another widely used aspect of Bourdieu’s theory in studying EAL students’ writing. Bourdieu (1991) defines linguistic capital as one’s facility with a privileged variety of a language. According to Bourdieu, “in a given linguistic market, some products are valued more highly than others; and part of the practical competence of speakers is to know how, and to be able to produce expressions which are highly valued in the markets concerned” (p. 18). Linguistic capital is sometimes subsumed under cultural capital, and both are related to other forms of capital, such as social capital and economic capital. Bourdieu’s notion of different forms of capitals enables me to understand that EAL students’ academic writing may not depend solely on one form of capital, but rather on various forms of capitals.
Bourdieu (2001) grounds his analysis of the connection between language, capital and power in the assumption that “the linguistic relation of power is not completely determined by the prevailing linguistic force alone…. the whole social structure is present in each interaction” (p. 67). Implicit in his argument is that the social structure can empower people with specific language capital. In the English-dominated academic setting in the U.S., EAL students may face challenges in navigating academic writing expectations because their linguistic background may not match the dominant linguistic market.

Bourdieu argues that one should not “forget the authority that comes to language from outside” (Bourdieu, 1991, p.109). In other words, language itself has no power; instead, power is embedded in the social position of the speaker and the institution that authorizes the power to the speaker. According to Bhatt (2001), one continuing development in the academic setting has been the increasing predominance of English as the vehicle for communicating research findings in written form. Hence it is necessary to study how EAL learners navigate academic writing expectations.

Additionally, in the academic writing field, there are norms and formalities for EAL users to follow. As claimed by Bourdieu (2001), “if one wishes to produce discourse successfully within a particular field, one must observe the forms and formalities of that field” (p .20). The cultural capital and linguistic capital EAL users possess have influence on the ways that EAL graduate students navigate academic writing expectations. EAL users are challenged because of the supremacy of English language in academia in the U.S. Additionally, “speakers lacking the legitimate competence or linguistic capital, are de facto excluded from the social domains in which this competence is required, or are condemned to silence” (Bourdieu, 1991, p 55). Bourdieu’s idea of norms echoes Gee’s idea that the norm is “not in anyone’s
head, but embedded in the history and social practices of the group” (Gee, 1992, p. 105). This raises important questions about studying EAL users’ academic writing experience in American higher educational institutions from the perspective of capital instead of deficiency or skill, especially in terms of making sense of and meeting writing expectations.

Linguistic capital has been used to tackle different aspects of writing by EAL users due to the complex and situated nature of academic writing. Canagarajah (2002), in his study of multilingual scholars, claims that while most EAL students “occupy a largely unequal status, as individuals from periphery communities, L1 students occupy a privilege position.” (p. 11). He further argues that L1 students’ “cultural identity enjoys the power of dominant communities from the geopolitical center, providing a head start on the linguistic and cultural capital necessary for success in the contemporary world” (p.11). Embedded in his argument is that EAL students practice English academic writing in the L1 context and cannot escape from the norms of the dominant linguistic circles. He also argues that it is possible that EAL students “fall short when L1 writing is treated as the norm or point of reference” (Canagarajah, 2002, p.12). Canagarajah also problematizes the use of “remedial” to define English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) students. As argued by him, “the term remedial is a misnomer, as ESOL students are not remedying a lack but adding new communicative skills to the rich linguistic repertoire they already have” (2002, p. 24).

Likewise, Carroll (2004), in his study of Japanese EAL users’ writing practice, argues against the stereotype that Asian EAL learners lack critical thinking in their writing, and claims that the reason for EAL users’ reticence is their limited language proficiency and resources rather than a lack of critical thinking. In other words, EAL writers do not have the same linguistic capital to show their critical thinking skills.
Furthermore, It would be superficial to analyze EAL students’ writing by focusing on the writing product itself, without reference to the constitution of the social field and the relation between this field and the broader space of social positions.

Grounded by a critical paradigm and Bourdieuan analysis, capital frameworks have been used to understand EAL students’ various writing practices in higher education contexts in the United States, and they can offer comprehensive lenses in studying EAL students’ writing because they possess unique cultural and linguistic capitals. The advantage of a capital framework is that it allows researchers to view writing from the perspectives of capital instead of only cognitive skills, hence it will inform my dissertation study how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations in U.S. graduate programs.

**Conclusion.**

This topic of EAL students’ academic writing is increasingly under scrutiny, and research adopting a sociocultural lens in studying EAL users’ writing and their experience of navigating writing expectations in the United States is on the rise. In this section I highlighted the significance of social practice and Bourdieu’s capital theories in studying EAL students’ experience of meeting academic writing expectations. I explained Lave and Wegner (1991)’s theories on learning as a social practice and Bourdieu’s theories of capital as an overarching framework I used in my dissertation study to understand the writing experience of Chinese EAL graduate students in United States, especially how they navigate academic writing expectations. I explored the central tenets of social practice, and social, linguistic and cultural capital theory to provide a comprehensive lens to my analysis. Using these theories together provides an integrated approach to understanding the writing practices of EAL users in American higher educational institutions in my dissertation study. For my data
analysis, this integrated framework guided me in my work to capture the social aspects of academic writing and the ways that various forms of social and cultural capital were involved in their navigating writing expectations. My theoretical framework provides strong warrant for a qualitative design to address the research questions in this study. In the next section I explain my qualitative study design.

**Methodology**

These notions of writing as a social practice and Bourdieu’s cultural and social capital theory enabled me to contextualize EAL students’ writing practice in the American social and cultural contexts. In particular, they helped me situate my study in the context of American higher education, and the students’ lived experiences as Chinese EAL international students in graduate education. The framework also allowed me to understand writing as a practice that is connected to language, cultural values, social norms, interactional patterns, and socialization practices within writers’ academic community. Together, these frameworks aim to challenge the cognitive theories of writing that have traditionally informed the conception of language and writing education. Social practice and capital theories also frame approaches to the research so the focus is on the EAL writers while taking into account the social, cultural and linguistic meanings students experience in writing. I believe the social practices and capital theories support my epistemological point of view as they provide an understanding of the social and cultural processes and interactions that take place in Chinese graduate students’ writing practices.

**Study Design.**

This dissertation study used an in-depth interview study design. I preface its description with a short discussion of qualitative research more generally, and then
why I chose qualitative research to study Chinese graduate students’ experience of navigating academic writing expectations in the United States. I explain how qualitative research allowed me to gain understandings of how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations, and in turn to promote attention to their needs and rights in negotiating the demands of academic writing in English in American universities. Then I explain why I chose qualitative study design over quantitative methods in data analysis.

Qualitative researchers seek to locate data analysis in explanatory or interpretive frameworks (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Qualitative research is based on the constructivist paradigm (Patton, 1990), assuming that meaning is not discovered but constructed and opting for a more personal and interactive mode of data collection than post-positivists (Crotty, 1998). The basic assumption guiding the constructive paradigm is that knowledge is socially constructed by people who are active in the research process, and that the social construction of reality can be conducted only through interaction between and among investigator and participants (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Constructivists advocate for a qualitative methodology, and believe that qualitative researchers should understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it (Schwandt, 2000).

Grounded in the constructivist paradigm, qualitative research designs allow researchers to “study selected issues in depth and detail and approach fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis that contribute to the depth, opened and detail of the qualitative inquiry” (Patton, 1990, p.13). Interpretation of themes in qualitative research can connect the data to broader concerns and “enable the analyst to transcend the local settings of his or her primary data collection in order to generalize to a wider range of social domains” (Coffey &
Atkinson, 1996, p.144). Additionally, qualitative research provides for transparency in researcher positionality in order to ensure that it “will not preordain the findings or bias the study” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 63). This stance is contradictory to quantitative methodologies that make assumptions of reader neutrality thereby subsuming researcher bias under the umbrella of perceptions of neutrality.

Quantitative methods are also used in studying English language learners’ writing experience. Specifically, quantitative methods have been used to study EAL users’ perception of burden in English academic writing (Hanauer & Englander, 2011), their critical thinking skills (Huang, 2010; McLaughlin & Moore, 2012; Melles, 2009), and assessment of academic writing skills (Alagozlu, 2007; Fahim, Bagherkazemi, & Alemi, 2010; Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003). Quantitative methods, mainly survey and assessment designs, allow researchers to involve a large number of participants to capture some aspects of the writing experience of EAL users to identify various types of challenges they face in academic writing. However, the quantitative studies reveal the tendency to reduce lived experiences of EAL users to simple traits and behavior codes in their academic writing. Consequently, to address the questions of how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations in U.S. higher education and how they can constructively respond to expectations they face in academic writing, I have chosen qualitative research methodologies. Qualitative paradigm of educational research is appropriate for exploring EAL graduate students’ experience of navigating writing expectations because its ontology and epistemology support such an exploration. As discussed earlier in this section, most sociocultural theory researchers perceive languages as a communicative tool and resource to make sense of their roles, relations with others, activities, and worlds. Language learning,
especially writing conceived as a social practice entails probable changes of participation in sociocultural activities and possible processes of transformation.

In my dissertation study, I aimed to describe and explore the Chinese graduate students’ academic writing experience. The qualitative paradigm allows me to explore how Chinese graduate students make sense of and experience academic writing expectations. The qualitative paradigm also affords me an opportunity to understand Chinese graduate students’ goals, interpretation of and relations with writing and how they make sense of academic writing expectations projected by their talk and the expectations from the perceptive of gatekeepers – their professors. Therefore, the interpretive paradigm suits my intention of probing Chinese EAL graduate students’ lived experience of navigating academic writing expectations in U.S. graduate programs. Specifically in my dissertation study, I used use in-depth, semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and document review. I also used grounded theory and narrative analysis to inform my data collection and analysis.

**Research Site.**

The research site is a small-sized research university in Upstate New York. This university is an institution with a large proportion of international students, especially at the graduate level. This university has seven schools, including School of Business Administration, School of Education, The College of Arts and Sciences, School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, Medical School, Dental School, and School of Music. It has a large number of Chinese students. In the Fall of 2013, a total of 1267 Chinese students enrolled in this university, including 725 graduate students, for a total of 15.25% of all the graduate students in this institution, with Chinese female and male graduate students almost equally represented (University Fact Book 2012-2013).
I chose this site because it has a large Chinese student body and it covers the major disciplines which allows me to explore the writing experience of students in different programs, thus to gain a comprehensive understanding of Chinese EAL graduate students’ writing practices. I also chose this university because I am a Ph. D student there, so it was convenient for me to negotiate access to participants and to further collect data.

**Sampling Strategy.**

I used a purposeful sampling strategy to achieve the most representative sample to address the research questions (Marshall, 1996). The participant sampling matrix in Table 3.1 outlines the distribution of participants I recruited for the study. To understand how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations, I believe it was important to capture the voices of individuals who have experience in navigating academic experiences in different contexts, master’s and doctoral programs, and various disciplines.

The participants of my study are Chinese students enrolled in graduate programs at the University and professors who have experience teaching Chinese graduate students academic writing or advising Chinese graduate students. All student participants have studied in American graduate programs for at least one semester so they have experience in English academic writing. The male and female interviewees represent the gender breakdown of Chinese graduate students at the research site (University Fact Book 2012-2013).

**Participants.**

I interviewed eight Chinese graduate students from four major academic fields, namely Business; Medicine; Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), and social sciences. I planned to interview two students in humanities, but after
CHINESE GRADUATE STUDENTS NAVIGATE WRITING EXPECTATIONS

sending out flyers for two rounds, I did not get any respondents in humanities. These four disciplines have the largest number of Chinese graduate students in the United States.

In addition, I conducted a focus group interview with three professors who have advised or taught Chinese graduate students for at least three years so they have experience with Chinese graduate students’ academic writing.

Table 3.1: Student participants matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Length in the U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qin Lin</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jianhua Li</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rui Guan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanlin Zou</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jinmei Luo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kun Wang</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xinqin Li</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei Gou</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To recruit student participants, I sent out flyers to the mailing list of the local Chinese Students and Scholars Association where local Chinese students communicate online. In the flyer, I explained the purpose of my study and stated that no personal information of my participants would be disclosed.
I used use snowball sampling to identify professor participants at the University of Grandville. Specifically I asked student participants to guide me towards other interviewees; I looked to them for suggestions of their advisors or professors who have experience teaching or advising Chinese graduate students and who fit the guidelines for participation and may have knowledge and experience relevant to the my study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). All three faculty members whom participated in my focus group interview had advised or taught Chinese graduate students for one and a half to ten years. Martina is an assistant professor in social sciences and has over 40 Chinese graduate students as advisees. She has taught Chinese graduate students for one and a half years. Wang, an associate professor in Biostatistics, got his Bachelors and Master’s degrees in Mainland China before he came to the United States for Doctoral degree. In his department, the majority of graduate students were from Mainland China. He has taught Chinese graduate students for eight years. Rebecca is a White American faculty member in the business school, and she has taught for 10 years and the majority of her graduate students were Chinese. All faculty members in my focus group are between 34 to 50 years old.

**Data Sources.**

To study the academic writing experience of Chinese graduate students in U.S higher education, the major data collection methods were in-depth semi-structured interviews with student participants, focus group interviews with professors, and document review. As shown in table 3.2, my major data sources were interview transcripts, a focus group transcript, and documents. By utilizing multiple types of data I was able to work toward data source triangulation in order to “look to see if the phenomenon or case remains the same at other times, in other spaces, or as persons interact differently” (Stake, 1995, p. 112).
Table 3.2: Data Collection Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do I need to know</th>
<th>Associated Data Sources</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Data Collection Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What does academic writing mean to Chinese graduate students?</td>
<td>Audio recordings, Fieldnotes, and Transcripts</td>
<td>Understanding subjects’ experiences and perspectives about the meaning of academic writing.</td>
<td>In-depth, semi-structured interviews with student participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is Chinese graduate students’ experience in meeting academic writing expectations?</td>
<td>Audio recordings, Fieldnotes, and Transcripts</td>
<td>To get in-depth understanding of students’ experiences of meeting academic writing expectations</td>
<td>In-depth, semi-structured structured interviews with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do professors understand Chinese graduate students’ academic writing</td>
<td>Students’ paper with professors’ feedback; Audio recordings, Fieldnotes; Transcripts</td>
<td>To get in-depth understand of students’ writing from professors’ perspectives</td>
<td>Focus group interview with professors; Document review</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are the major challenges of Chinese graduate students in meeting academic writing expectations?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies and resources to meet the expectations?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audio recordings; Fieldnotes; Transcript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get in-depth understanding of what can be done to support students participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth, semi-structured interview with students; Focus group interview with students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection Methods.

Document Review.

Documents were used in this study because they can provide “background information that helps establish the rationale for selecting a particular site, program or
population” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 160) and the analysis of document is rich in “portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting” (p. 160).

The textual data for this dissertation consists of students’ papers with their instructors’ feedback, syllabus with specific instructions for writing assignment, and any documents pertaining to the research questions of this dissertation study. These documents provided background information that helped establish the rationale for conducting the individual and focus group interview, and offered firsthand materials reflecting students’ actual academic writing skills and processes. To address my research questions, I investigated, documented, and analyzed their written texts, and feedback students got from their professors. Participants provided the text data in either electronic or paper form.

Specifically I collected students’ papers with professors’ or journal reviewers’ feedback to see if they were able to meet academic expectations, what challenges they faced, and what professors said about their academic writing. These documents were particularly evocative of deeper insights into the challenges of meeting academic writing expectations for Chinese students. Additionally, these documents were used as artifacts in conducting individual interviews with student participants. I also referred to students’ papers to ask questions in individual interviews with students and in the focus group interview with professors.

**Interviewing.**

Qualitative interview as a method is often used to encourage an interviewee to talk about a particular issue or range of topics, and it can “reveal subtleties and complexities that could go undetected through the use of more standardized measures” (Burns, 2000. p.14). By probing into the experience of an interviewee, the interviewer can gain a deeper understanding of social phenomenon than would be obtained from
purely quantitative methods.

Qualitative interviewing allows researchers to explore the views, experiences, beliefs and motivations of individuals on specific matters, and to find out both explicit and tacit knowledge (Spradley, 1979). Interviewing allows me to understand how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing experiences from their own perspectives and professors’ perspectives because “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (pp. 8-9). Hence interviewing allowed me to answer my research questions in this study.

For the interviews, I recorded my data with a digital audio recorder, and then transcribed the interviews in a word-for-word format. I conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with student participants. Each interview focused on a slightly different aspect of participants’ lives and experiences based on their educational backgrounds and length of stay in the United States. The first student interview focused on the their demographic information, experience of English writing in general, and understanding of academic writing expectations. After I coded the first round of interview, I was able to come up with more specific questions. The second round of interviews addressed specific topics with a focus on the participants’ experience of, engagement with and interpretations of academic writing, their challenges, strategies and resources they use to navigate academic writing expectations.

To be able to express themselves, all student participants could choose either English or Mandarin since all the student participants are native Mandarin speakers and they learn English as an additional language. At the beginning of each interview, I asked student participants which language they preferred to use to ensure the
interview could be conducted smoothly. All student interviewees chose to have the interview in English, but two of them had to switch to Mandarin to express some specific words or ideas.

I coded all interviews in English and translated Mandarin parts into English. Each interview lasted from 28 minutes to 48 minutes. The interviews were “reflective“ as I did not start with a set of specific questions, but rather a number of broad issues. At the same time, I kept notes of the participants’ behaviors such as facial expression and body language during the interview, because when combined with observation, interviews “allow the researcher to understand the meaning that everyday activities hold for people” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 145).

All student interviews were conducted in the interviewer’s office since it was private. This approach can elicit information concerning the learners’ tacit knowledge about their academic writing experience in a natural environment.

**Focus Group Interview.**

Interviews can be conducted either with individual participants or in focus group discussions. Focus group interviews can be used to identify perceptions, thoughts and impressions of a selected group of people for a specific topic of investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), and it is widely used in the field of second language research. Since academic writing is deeply embedded in the world rather than existing solely as a result of classroom practice, focus group study offers rich insights in answering the research question in this study.

I conducted one focus group interview with three professors who have experience working with Chinese graduate students. Embedded in this method is the belief that individuals’ attitudes and beliefs are socially constructed. It allowed me to study participants in an atmosphere more natural than artificial experimental circumstances
and more relaxed than a one-to-one interview. The focus group can create a “supportive environment, asking focused questions to encourage discussion and the expression of differing opinions and points of view” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p.149).

Specifically in my dissertation study, I used guided questions to ask about professors’ experience working with Chinese graduate students, their perceptions of how Chinese graduate students understand and navigate academic writing expectations, and what they see as the major challenges for Chinese graduate students in academic writing. The specific guiding questions were based on the emerging themes from interviews with graduate students in this study. Professors in my study are “elites” in position of power and influence (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012), and they can be the brokers of knowledge in academic writing in U.S. higher educational institutions. I also conducted focus group interview with three faculty members because of their expertise in issues relevant to Chinese graduate students’ writing and for their perspectives on the relevant expectations. The focus group protocol was developed based on the student interviews and addressed questions about what professors expect in students’ academic writing and how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations from professors’ perspectives.

Focus group interview data in this study allowed me to gain multiple perspectives on how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations. Compared to individual interviews in this study, focus groups can elicit a multiplicity of views and emotional processes within a group context.

**Data Management.**

The data collection methods presented above produced significant amounts of data that needed to be organized and stored in ways that promote efficient retrieval.
All data collected during this dissertation study were logged in a research journal, inclusive of date, time, and location collected, as well as which participants were involved, to keep data retrievable and manageable (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Qualitative data analysis software Nvivo 9 was also used to ease storage of and access to transcribed data, as well as to facilitate movement and connections between codes and categories and across data sources during analysis. My memos and all other data files were stored and backed up electronically. All paper documents were logged in the research journal, identified using a corresponding naming convention on the document itself, and filed securely.

**Data Analysis.**

The analytic framework informing my data analysis is grounded theory. In this section I will explain the reasons why I chose grounded theory and the specific coding and memo writing elements of grounded theory.

Grounded theory offers researchers systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories that are grounded in the data researchers have (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010) and “serves as a way to learn about the worlds we study and a method for developing theories to understand them” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 30). Grounded theory involves close and careful approaches to our data, and the generation of theories from what we find within it. I align with Charmaz’s position in perceiving researchers as situated in the world they try to understand and the qualitative data they gather, rather than seeing the data and emerging theory as separable from a distant observer. During data analysis, I looked specifically for emerging issues around participants’ understandings of and experience of academic writing expectations in the U.S. social context, what it meant and how students used their social and cultural capital to navigated it. Additionally
my theoretical framework provided me sensitizing concepts – social interaction, the function of language, cultural values, and social relations of power. Grounded theory also enabled me to systematically investigate and fully immerse myself in the data, and make sense of events and narratives taking place in my research setting. Next, I present my data analysis that is consistent with this framework, including coding of data and memo writing.

**Coding.**

All recorded interviews were transcribed, and through examining these transcripts I developed recurrent themes and issues that were related to academic writing, expectations, and experience as Chinese graduate students, as well as other themes that emerged. In this process, I looked for patterns in terms of my interviewees’ experience of navigating academic writing expectations.

I used NVivo9 to code all data collected in this study. The software helped me organize, saturate and analyze the large amount of textual data in the process of coding, examining and organizing the codes. The analysis and interpretation of the interview and the textual data were conducted by the researcher. The researcher also had two peers for peer debriefing in one interview transcript, which provided an element of investigator triangulation to the analysis (Patton, 1990).

I went through different phases of immersion in my data, found different sets of themes, recoded and refined themes, wrote memos, and returned to gather further data. I moved within and across data sources, and back and forth between initial codes, focused codes, and continually revisited earlier data as new ideas and themes emerged. To analyze the interview and textual data, I employed constant comparative methods, making comparisons across data, codes, and categories (Bryant, & Charmaz, 2010).
Grounded theorists make sense of the data through several levels of coding, mainly open coding, focused coding, axial coding and theoretical coding (Bryant, & Charmaz, 2010). The initial phase of grounded theory coding consist of categorizing “words, lines, or segment of data followed by a focused, selective phase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large amounts of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). I started data analysis with line-by-line coding that is an enormously useful tool that allowed me to draw of comparisons between data in the field-notes and the potentialities of analytical categories. As one of the strengths of grounded theory lies in its ongoing analysis, opening coding not only condenses meanings by capturing codes, but also points to possible gaps in the data and informs later data collection.

After line-by-line coding, I continued data analysis with focused coding. Focused coding schemes “are more directed, selective, and conceptual than word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident coding” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). At the stage of focused coding, I compared different participants’ experience, actions and interpretations of academic writing expectations shown in different data sources, mainly their writing samples and interview transcripts. I also compared the two rounds of interview data collected from the same participants for same or different patterns of language use, behavior, or goals.

After focused coding, I continued data analysis with axial coding. According to Charmaz (2006), axial coding entails relating categories to subcategories by specifying the properties and dimensions of categories. For example, one can enumerate what is related to the axis of a category. For example, based on focused coding, I came to the realization that some codes, including thinking, freedom, and sharing personal feelings demonstrated the different writing expectations between students’ writing in China.
and the United States. They were also the academic culture shocks they had to explore in U.S. graduate schools. So I started to use “academic culture shocks” during axial coding. Meanwhile some major themes started to emerge. While axial coding can refine the emergent concepts, the analytical frame might also restrict researchers in their codes and analysis. In the phase of axial coding, I was able to consolidate themes and build a concept map of the major themes.

**Memo.**

Throughout the process of data analysis, I wrote analytic memos to document thoughts and ideas and to secure the connections that began to emerge (Charmaz, 2006). Writing analytic memos can help researchers to capture, record, and retrieve relationships identified throughout data analysis (Maxwell, 1998). Analytic memos, or “informal analytic notes” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 73), can be a helpful procedure in reflecting on the codes, analyzing data, and accelerating productivity. Memos can complement coding by offering a space for elaborating on the assumptions in various levels of codes and preliminary ideas about emerging theories. Grounded theorists can compare the data across different participants, data collected at different points from the same informant, focused codes, conceptual ideas, and analysis with existing literature. Memos can contribute to the refinement of codes, concepts, and thus analysis.

**Theoretical Sampling.**

After I had already defined and tentatively conceptualized relevant ideas in my data that indicated areas to probe with more data, I then used theoretical sampling to gather more data based on the first round of interviews, and conducted my second round of interviews.
As argued by Charmaz (2006): “Theoretical sampling ensures that you construct full and robust categories and leads you to clarify relationships between categories” (p.103) and gives researchers’ work “analytic depth and precision” (p. 106). In a process common to grounded theory, the researcher returns to the field to gather more specific data on particular issues, with the goal of filling gaps in data or theory. After I finished writing memos and first round coding, I used theoretic sampling to seek pertinent data to develop emerging theory. After coding the data from theoretical sampling and when “gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 113), I stopped gathering data.

Unit of Analysis.

I used narrative as the unit of analysis in my dissertation because it allowed me to explore the experiences of Chinese EAL graduate students in ways that can be told, which can be recounted and hence made predictable. According to Wortham (2001), narrative in the human sciences refers to a family of approaches to diverse kinds of texts. Additionally autobiographic narratives can “help narrators express and manage multiple, partly contradictory selves and experiences” (p. 7). According to Labov and Waletzky (1967), narrative is a particular way of reporting past events, in which the order of a sequence of independent clauses is interpreted as the order of the events. Labov (1997) further defines a narrative of personal experience as “a report of a sequence of events that have entered into the biography of the speaker by a sequence of clauses that correspond to the order of the original events” (p. 398). Labov (1997) also distinguishes narrative from other forms of story telling, arguing that these “events that have entered into the speaker's biography are emotionally and socially evaluated, and so transformed from raw experience” (p. 398).
Labov (2006) argues that a narrative is initiated when a person is impelled to tell others of events that happened before by either an external or internal stimulus. The initiation of a narrative requires conversational work. A narrative can be pre-constructed by a cognitive process that begins with a decision that a given event is reportable, which is a recursive process. He also maintains that “pre-construction begins with the most reportable event and proceeds backwards in time to locate events that are linked causally each to the following one” (p. 37). To understand how people transform the events of real time in their narrative, researchers should also compare event chains with the sequence of narrative clauses.

Narratives can be an important element of qualitative study (Wortham, 2001). First, people can have an opportunity to construct and sometimes transform themselves “by telling autobiographic narratives that are representational foreground certain characteristics-and by subsequently acting in terms of the characteristics thus foregrounded” (p. 7). Using narratives, I was able to hear Chinese EAL graduate students’ stories of their academic writing experience, explore how they were being socialized into their discourse community in writing, and study how different forms of capital were involved for them to meet writing expectations. Second, narratives allow people to voice themselves, and the “process of voicing invokes positions and ideologies from the larger social world as the characters described come to speak like recognizable types of people.” (p. 40). Specifically in my study, narratives also allowed me to explore how EAL students’ writing process changed as they developed practices increasingly more central to the academic communities they were joining.

According to Riessman (2003), there are four models of narrative analysis: thematic analysis, structural analysis, interactive analysis and performative analysis. I used thematic analysis that emphasizes the content; in other words, what is told is
more emphasized than how it is told. It matches my analytic framework – grounded theory. I collected stories and inductively organized them by theme. Using narrative analysis helped me to look beneath the surface level of individual stories to look at the “life meaning of participants” (Emden, 1998, p. 36). I read all interview text several times to identify reportable events in my participants’ narrative. For example, I noticed many stories my participants recounted were about self-independence, flexible standards of writing evaluation, and the high level of autonomy in choosing topics. I identified the fragments of these ideas within the text, and then I grouped them together to identify a coherent story. I also looked for the reasons behind these stories and tried to find how these stories were connected. Consequently, in the second round of interview, I asked my participants to further elaborate on events related autonomy, flexibility and self-independence in their writing. Their individual story pointed to one shared theme - academic freedom that was an academic culture shock for them. I coded all excerpts that are related to “academic freedom”, and identified fragments of constituent themes from the ideas within the text. After that, I compared the event chains in all interview texts to create one coherent core story of “freedom” as an academic culture shock. I then stopped until all “key ideas are retained and extraneous content eliminated” (Emden, 1998, p. 35).

Narrative analysis suited my dissertation study for me to find common thematic elements across research participants and the events they reported and to interpret what was said by focusing on the meaning my participants intended to convey. Furthermore, I used their narratives from various data sources to help me understand and consolidate emerging themes.

**Ethical Considerations.**
In designing this study, I have followed the principles provided by the Office of Human Subjects Research Board at the University of Grandville (University of Grandville, n.d.). In this section, I discuss the principles of consent, non-maleficence, confidentiality, and beneficence.

Before I started to collect data, I had already obtained informed consent from the institution and participants after acquiring the RSRB approval. All students’ and faculty’s participation was voluntary. Respect for the informants’ autonomy, value and decisions are required in the moral career of a social researcher (Flick, 2009; Laine, 2000).

Despite coming at the expense of some insightful data or a full description, obeying the code of confidentiality is necessary. On the one hand, securing the participants’ personal information achieves anonymity. On the other hand, the assurance of the researchers’ integrity can facilitate participants’ rapport with researchers (Laine, 2000). Educational researchers should be aware of the “power, obligation, and responsibilities of social research” (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000, p. 108). I was fully aware of a researcher’s power in disclosing information and representing the participants, and I weighed it against the responsibility of serving the academy and protecting the participants. I made careful decisions about what to uncover in the process of research, especially in drafting findings to make sure that the study had no negative influence on student participants’ enrollment at their university or faculty participants’ work at the university.

*Reciprocity.*

I provided beneficence in the form of knowledge to the best of my ability. The students agreeing to participate in the study benefited from the study by reflecting on their experience of navigating academic writing expectations in the United States.
higher education. In this study student participants can better understand the factors contributing to their performance in academic writing, to hear academic writing expectations from the professors’ perspectives and reflect on their learning process through participating in the study. The professors may also benefit from the findings of this study and better understand how students understand academic writing expectations and better support Chinese EAL students and all international students at large.

There was no payment for participation in this study. However, for the students and professors who participated in the study, I offered a 20-dollar gift card to show appreciation of their time and efforts at the end of the interviews.

**Triangulation.**

Triangulation refers to strategies researchers employ to incorporate different perspectives on a phenomenon under study to answer research questions (Flick, 2009). According to Denzin (1984), there are several major triangulation protocols, including data source triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation. The way researchers approach their work may influence their findings in social science studies, so it is important to use “multiple approaches within a single study” to “illuminate or nullify some extraneous influence” (Stake, 1995, p. 114).

In my dissertation study, I used methodological triangulation and data source triangulation. Methodological triangulation uses different methods to collect various data sources, while data source triangulation employs the same method to gather data at different time, in difference spaces, and with different people (Denzin, 1984). When different forms or sources of data point to similar conclusions, the possible bias can be reduced. To look for corroborating or complementing evidence to deepen and broaden
my understanding of how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations in the United States, I had multiple data sources, including interview and focus group transcripts, field notes, and documents.

**Member Checking.**

Member checking refers to seeking verification of findings from participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking throughout the study helped me align my developing data analysis with realities of participants’ experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Stake, 1995). I used member checking by presenting my preliminary findings to both my student and professor participants. Specifically, I frequently shared data transcripts, codes, categories and interpretations with study participants to ensure accuracy of data interpretation. Another rationale for using member checking in my dissertation study was that all my student participants spoke English as an additional language, and what they said might not be what they meant depending on their English language proficiency level. I shared with them my preliminary findings with them to ensure the credibility.

**Exit Strategy.**

It is important for researchers to delineate an exit strategy when they negotiate access to a site a researcher also. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), “one does not grab data and run” (p. 130). During my study I met my student participants twice and developed relationship with my participants. As a Chinese graduate student, I will continue to be a member of the Chinese students community. In other words, I will not exit the community when I finish my study. I will maintain contact with my participants at the completion of the study if they are comfortable with it. Additionally, I will share my research findings with my participants and the community of Chinese graduate students.
Chapter Four: Findings

I implemented a narrative analysis of multiple data sources in my study, including two rounds of semi-structured interviews with eight Chinese graduate students, students’ writing samples with instructors’ feedback, and a focus group interview with three professors to reveal key elements within Chinese EAL graduate students’ practices of navigating writing expectations.

All eight student participants in this study were born in China and received their Bachelor’s degree in Mainland China. Seven of them speak English as their second language, while one, Qin, grew up in Japan, speaking Japanese as her second language and English as her third language. Since all student participants are full time graduate students at a research university, they are actively engaged in academic writing in the forms of course papers, conference proposals, and journal manuscripts. Kun and Xinqin, two doctoral students who have been in their programs for four years, have published articles in peer-reviewed journals. Other students have been extensively exposed to academic writing in class, although the role of academic writing varies in different programs.

All three faculty members in my focus group interview had advised or taught Chinese graduate students for one and a half to ten years. Two faculty members, Rebecca and Martina, were born and educated in the United States, and both have extensive experience teaching or advising Chinese graduate students. Wang, an associate professor in biostatistics in the medical school, was born in China and came to the United States for a Ph.D. degree 16 years ago.

Drawing on writing as a social practice (Lave & Wegner, 1991) and Bourdieu’s (1991) theories of social and linguistic capital, I organize the findings of
this study along three major themes, including navigating “academic culture shock” (Gilbert, 2000) in writing, navigating social relations in writing practices, and using various sources and strategies to navigate writing expectations. The first theme that emerged from the data was navigating “academic culture shock” in a new academic context. I will unpack this theme from the perspectives of thinking, freedom, and sharing personal feelings. These three sub-themes are the most frequently mentioned “new things” the participants have to face in U.S. graduate schools and the biggest writing differences between their previous studies in China and graduate studies in the United States. The second theme is around social relations in the students’ writing practices. I present them from the perspectives of navigating social interaction with people in their writing community, including picturing audience, politeness, and solving conflicts in collaborative writing. The third major theme focuses on the sources and strategies Chinese EAL graduate students used to navigate writing expectations. The major sources and strategies they used include friendship-based peer support, feedback from their instructors, and professorial and institutional support.

In this chapter, I revisit my data, using narrative as my unit of analysis, and weave in excerpts from student interviews, focus group interviews with faculty members, students’ writing samples with faculty’s feedback, and my research memos in a strategic effort to illustrate salient ideas and dimensions associated with each thematic thread. For instance, when I finished the first round of student interview, I transcribed all interviews and analyzed all interview and document data. I came to the realization that some codes are frequently used. Specifically these codes include “self-dependence,” “free writing,” “U.S.-China difference in writing: freedom,” “lack of mentoring,” and “evaluation: flexibility”. I added two probing questions in my second
round of student interview to ask student interviews to elaborate and clarify these terms, using their life stories about writing. After I finished coding the second round of interviews, my final analysis included 16 excerpts coded “China-U.S difference: freedom”, six as “lack of mentoring,” five as “self-dependence”, and four as “Feedback: autonomy,” and three as “evaluation: flexibility”. These codes pointed out to the theme of academic freedom in students’ writing practices. I then consolidated all excerpts that fully demonstrated freedom as an academic culture shock for students in their writing. I revisited all excerpts and compared all of them to identify excerpts that can fully support the claims I made about academic freedom as an academic culture shock. Then I compared the excerpts I selected and compared them with the focus group interview data and students’ writing samples I collected. During the process I took research memos of what excerpts pointed to the theme of freedom as an academic culture shock. I prioritized the multiple excerpts that could represent the same themes, and reflected on their essential meanings to make sure the excerpts I chose offered strong and sound evidence to support my claims. In other words, I used representativeness across multiple data sources to select the excerpts that could best illustrate and describe the claims presented in this study.

As mentioned earlier, I looked across multiple data sources and used member checking during my data analysis to ensure authentic interpretation of their narratives to enhance trustworthiness. I had frequent email exchanges with my participants and shared with them my preliminary findings about academic freedom. They all had opportunities to ask for clarifications and make corrections. Three student participants had to speak Mandarin to further explain what they meant by flexibility in writing evaluation and self-independence. Hence the follow up communication helped to
clarify assumptions, and misinterpretations due to language proficiency levels, thus added to the trustworthiness of findings.

All the themes directly addressed my research questions about how Chinese EAL graduate students navigate academic writing expectations, specifically:

1) What are Chinese EAL graduate students’ experiences of understanding and meeting writing expectations?

2) What are the new academic writing expectations Chinese EAL graduate students have to understand and meet?

3) What strategies and resources do they use in writing while performing their regular academic writing practices?

Navigating Academic Culture Shock in Writing

The first overarching theme to unpack in this study directly related to my research question: What are the new academic writing expectations Chinese EAL graduate students have to understand and meet in U.S. graduate school? The first round interview gave student participants an opportunity to reflect on their general writing experience in their current programs and the major writing expectation differences between their U.S. graduate programs and their previous studies in China.

Six of the eight student interviewees and all three faculty members in my study strongly noted that “independent and critical thinking” was highly valued in their current programs. They generally referred “independent and critical thinking” to having autonomy in choosing topics to write, reading analytically, and incorporating their opinions in writing. As I explore more deeply below, definitions of “independent and critical thinking” arose from my participants’ interview responses. Most participants also expressed mixed views of another new academic culture element –
freedom that was closely related to the theme of critical and independent thinking. Also, sharing personal feelings emerged as one major element of academic culture shock they had to explore in U.S. graduate school writing. In the second round of interviews, I asked student participants some probing questions around these three major elements to further explore their writing experiences in their new academic community. Digging deeply into these three concepts and listening to students’ recounting of writing in their current graduate programs, I categorized them as major “academic culture shocks” described by students as they discussed their challenges in understanding and meeting writing expectations. I present my findings within each of these categories.

**Critical and Independent Thinking.**

When asked to reflect on their writing experience and share the major new expectations they had to explore in graduate school, participants frequently mentioned that they had to “think independently and critically” in U.S. graduate school, which was also the biggest difference between writing in China and in the United States. Student responses demonstrated an awareness of the difference in writing in two different academic environments, as shown in the 14 quotations coded as “China-U.S. difference: thinking” in my data. Wanlin, Rui, Qin, Jinmei, and Jianhua explicitly elaborated their experience of understanding and demonstrating thinking in their writing process.

**A “Uniform” or Critical and Independent Thinking.**

The question of “thinking” was not initially included in my student interview protocol. When more students started to refer to it as a major academic culture shock, I added it to my second round interview protocol and asked students to define and clarify the term. Although students used “thinking” very generally in this study, a
further analysis of their recounting revealed that by “thinking” they were mainly referring to “independent thinking” and “critical thinking” in their writing practices. Students made clear distinctions between thinking and writing in China and in the United States. Their responses revealed that their writing experience in the United States was more of entering a community of practice than the formulaic and solitary activity in China. Students in my study were immersed in making meaning of writing which is “embedded in social practices within which various groups of people talk, think, and act out their cultural models of mind” (Gee, 1992, p. 51). For them to make meaning of and to meet writing expectations, they had to instead of following formula, read with a critical eye, critique established authors, and incorporate their own voice in their writing.

Wanlin, a second year Master’s student in Finance, gave a quick response to my first question about the different expectations in writing between the United States and China, saying “The difference is that when I write in Chinese I don’t have to think [but] when I write in English I have to think a lot” (Wanlin, first interview). Rui, a Master’s student in Electronic Engineering, also mentioned “I think here [the United States] it requires more for your personal thoughts than in China” (Rui, second interview). Like many other students, both Rui and Wanlin were aware of the expectation of critical and independent thinking involved in writing, and they also revealed that thinking was a new and challenging expectation for them in their graduate studies.

When navigating writing expectations in the United States, they also found that independent and critical thinking is expected in writing products and through the whole process of writing, from picking a topic, deciding what articles to read, thinking
about “what is behind those articles” (Qin, second interview), to actually writing based on their critical and independent thinking.

Qin, a Master’s student who received her elementary education in Japan but her high school and undergraduate education in Mainland China, noted the importance of the new expectation for graduate-level writing, saying, “at Master’s level a lot of articles require your own thinking. I think in graduate level the things you select, the references you select, you really need to have your own opinion” (Qin, second interview). Qin substantiated the concept of “thinking” by including the selection of articles to use in writing and having her own thoughts in the writing process. Her answers indicated that the academic culture shock – “thinking” to her was analytical and critical thinking in preparing for writing. She further explained the new academic writing expectation by making a strong comparison between relatively “random” undergraduate writing and graduate writing that involves independent thinking from her experience, saying:

I think in undergraduate study you don’t have to express your opinion it is objective. Whereas in Master’s level a lot of articles require your own thinking. Maybe it is just me. Like in undergraduate I don’t think about those problems I just write it. I don’t have my own opinions…. so I think in undergraduate level it is like oh let’s find 10 articles on this subject. You don’t even think about what is behind those articles. And right now it is a whole other approach you think from the bottom first you think about the core ideas first then you select articles. It is not that random. (Qin, second interview)

To Qin graduate level writing required more analytical and independent thinking than undergraduate level writing. It was a totally “new approach” to her, and she came to her current program underprepared, especially in approaching literature
analytically, and found it hard to transition into English academic writing. My findings add nuance to the understanding of this transition by highlighting students’ experiences of selecting journal articles, reading analytically, and synthesizing the ideas as what Qin mentioned as “what is behind those articles.”

Qin also included the element of picking sides in understanding thinking. When asked to explain further her perception of thinking, Qin mentioned that you have to research on a specific issue, and analyze it, but you have to present both sides, or three or several different sides. And you have to pick one and support it. I found it is really interesting. Instead of just approaching from your perspective, you have to look at different opinions, opponents and try to find a way to argue with it. (Qin, first interview, 07/16/2014)

Qin’s understanding of independent and creative thinking matched some faculty members’ expectations in students writing. In the faculty focus group interview, Rebecca, an instructor from the business school, revealed that when teaching Chinese graduate students how to write business communication and tax memos, she tried to “force them to think there are different ways of doing business, you have to be creative in business, and I find that they struggle a little bit with that.” Likewise, Martina, a faculty member in education, responded that she would like her students to look at theories critically, and being able to synthesize what they find into their own ideas, and being able to support their ideas with other research. So it is like critical analysis, presenting it all, but all is pulling things together in a meaningful way. (Martina, Focus group).

Responses from both faculty members revealed their emphasis on students’ ability to think critically and independently in their writing, which is consistent with student participants’ understanding of writing expectations identified in student interviews.
Rui, a second-year Master’s student in electrical engineering, also showed awareness of independent thinking. Specifically he mentioned that in finishing lab project reports he did not get much hands-on help and he had to “think independently.” When asked about what he meant by thinking, Rui directly connected it to the process of online searching, looking for resources, communicating with professors about their writing, and planning projects. His definition of thinking is exemplified in his statement “search, dig deep, reach out, go online, find all kinds of sources, ask professors, go to the library and find books and read it and decide how you are going to conduct your project” (Rui, first interview, 07/19/2014).

Jinmei pushed the perception of thinking to a different level by reflecting on her struggle with critical thinking. She said:

Here in writing critical thinking is more valued and this is what I struggle with because I think I like the critical thinking because I used to obey or follow what others are talking about. For example when I read some journals I mean here journals mean academic journals. When I read academic journals I always think they are right. It was funny when I read writer A was criticizing writer B. Because for me when I read each of their writing I think they both provided very sound argument but when I read each of their argument I still think she is right and he is right. But when I read it I just couldn’t think in that way. But read them I think oh they are right I think it is also a problem. (Jinmei, 1st interview, 08/13/2014)

Jinmei’s response revealed that thinking was not a struggle only in the practice of drafting papers but also in the way she read articles and planned her writing process. She perceived published journal articles as authorities and found it hard to challenge other people, especially people that seemed to be established in her field. Furthermore,
she found it hard to read with critical eyes and assumed all articles she read were “right.”

Jinmei’s responses echoed Martina, a faculty member in education. Martina expected her graduate students to read literature and theories critically, and further synthesize various theories to build arguments. However, she found that in her Chinese graduate students’ writing:

There is sometimes more struggle of incorporating theories in their writing. It feels more like pasted in there. Sometimes there is the plagiarism problem. But the theories don’t feel like they are integrated or digested. So theories are always presented straight from the author’s mouth….It doesn’t feel like they have thought about the theories. And it doesn’t get synthesized into other theories well. Especially when it comes to the final argument, the paper is not always well supported.

It is clear that Martina expected her students to show deep understanding of the theories, incorporate multiple theories and further support their arguments in writing.

*Writing Teaching in China – “A Uniform That Makes It Easy for Other People to Read Your Stuff”.*

To fully understand Chinese EAL graduate students’ perceptions of thinking, I asked the participants why it was new to them. Not surprisingly, most interviewees attributed the lack of thinking training to the high-stakes test system in China. Seven of my eight student interviewees revealed that in China they wrote primarily to get high scores on English exams, and to do so they had to follow certain “successful” models and choose the “safe way.” Moreover, they thought that these tests, especially the *Gaokao* – the high-stakes national college entrance exam, as well as College
English Tests Band 4 and Band 6\(^5\) emphasized students’ ability to follow models instead of creative thinking. Their responses specifically suggested that during their studies in China, they were always told what to write and how to write, and they always had “specific models to follow.” In other words, independent and critical thinking was not valued in the Chinese test system.

For instance, Kun, a fifth-year Ph.D. student in computer sciences, was extensively involved in grant writing, conference proposal writing, journal article reviews, and publication. He harshly criticized writing for tests as “stupid”, saying

“It is stupid. So basically people not only me but also my friends, my classmates did it in the same way. We learned writing by the samples, given by the textbook, the so called experts. You know the format, so you try to remember the sample, and you just try to fill in content in the sample. So it is a well formatted piece of code. Let me just use code but I don’t think it is good writing. So when you do when you do this in exam it is safe, because the graders see many of the examples and they can quickly get what you mean. (Kun, second interview, 09/27/2014)

As Kun argued, most people in his class wrote in the same way by following similar examples, textbooks, and “so called experts.” Additionally, the “safe” way to write in English exams was to cater to the graders’ preferences and make sure the graders could easily capture what students were trying to convey in their writing.

When asked how they were taught to write in China, Rui explained that in China he had to follow a specific format - “a uniform that makes it easy for other people to read your stuff” (Rui, second interview, 08/06/2014). Rui was not alone in strictly following some writing formats. Jinmei explained that her writing training in China

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\(^5\) College English Test Band 4 and 6 are national English tests for college students. Almost all non-English majors have to pass Band 4 to receive their Bachelor’s degree and Band 6 to receive their Master’s degree. Students can take them twice a year.
shaped the way she thought about writing format and perceived professors’
expectations, saying:

I always had this kind of format there. So when I was writing I just try to follow
some formats or formula. This is my problem. I don’t want to break to me the
writing tradition in my mind. So in my mind I wonder if I was doing it in the right
way. (Jinmei, first interview, 08/13/2014)

Jinmei’s recounting reveals a fear of not following the “right” format or not following
the “right” format in her writing. Likewise, many interviewees have expressed a
strong sense of what was the “right” way of writing. When they were exposed to
graduate-level writing in the United States they started to realize that there is no
“standard” way to write. Hence their previous writing assignments fell short in
addressing problems in graduate-level writing in the United States.

While most student participants expressed that thinking was a priority in their
undergraduate or high school level writing, Jinmei, a veteran English teacher in China
and also a second-year doctoral student in education, disclosed that thinking was not
only not emphasized, but that to meet graders’ expectations in the writing section of
tests, teachers even had to discourage students from showing creative thinking in their
writing. Jinmei gave a vivid description of how she taught her students to write in
English tests in China:

because in China you just generally you were taught the way you are supposed to
think. I think that is also the difference. When I taught my student how to pass the
college English tests, I used to tell them, don’t write something too novel too new
because the teacher who grade your paper don’t know it and they might think it is
junk but actually you know what the student tells about is very valuable.
Sometimes students will get a very low mark because of the teacher’s ignorance.

(Jinmei, first interview, 08/13/2014)

She revealed the different standards for “junk” and “valuable” writing. Embedded in her answer is that students lack extended writing training in college; instead they were trained to get a high score on high-states English tests. Jinmei also indicated that the successful model was provided so students could succeed in the fierce competition of the Chinese educational system. If thinking was not expected in their writing, students would strictly follow instructions instead of thinking independently and creatively, which echoed Kun’s concern about “safe” writing in China. There is a trace of fear of being different and showing critical thinking in her writing.

Furthermore, Jinmei problematized writing training in China by saying that English teachers themselves were “not trained to think” either, so the lack of critical and independent thinking had passed from teachers to students. To make sure her students could get satisfactory scores in English tests, she would encourage them to follow rules and refrain from sharing “new ideas.” Specifically, she said she “appreciated students’ fresh idea[s] but before the test I would tell them don’t write this way, because the graders who grade your paper don’t have much time to read so carefully write your idea” (Jinmei, first interview, 08/13/2014). It is clear from her narratives that tests and the pressure for students to cater to graders’ preference shaped her teaching approach in English writing in China. She revealed that the time constraint lead to graders’ preference for certain “successful” models. Additionally, the graders or teachers would not have enough time to appreciate new ideas, and they only wanted to see if students could meet their standards. The fear of students’ failing the tests was evident. As a full-fledged member of academia in China, Jinmei was an experienced participant in her discourse community. She also had learned the
successful model of writing and institutional norms. However, through her engagement with various members of the community at her current program, she strived to conform to the U.S. norms of academic writing, which suggested that academic writing was a practice of socialization and acculturation into the mainstream discourse (Zhang, 2010).

Some students thought the lack of thinking was deeply rooted in academic culture in China. For instance, Kun said

It is a cultural thing because in China everybody does it in the same way. Because you want to save time, you want to so when you have several solutions you want the easiest way the simple way, why not just follow the successful cases? (Kun, second interview, 09/27/2014)

Although he related the lack of thinking training to culture, he still highlighted the fact that writing following successful cases was “safe” and could “save time.” His experience of the “simple way” and “successful cases” was closely connected to the test-oriented academic culture, which explained why many student interviewees felt unprepared when they came to the United States.

According to some students, one example of following “successful cases” and the “simple way” is citing famous people, “old sayings” or “beautiful words.” Wanlin explained what she perceived as the “right model” and “beautiful” writing as follows:

First never run away from your topic. This is very important in Gaokao. Your first sentence is your small topic in the second paragraph, and then following this first sentence is your story, why and also cite some famous people, and we remember lots of them, famous sentences. So boring. (Wanlin, second interview, 07/31/2014)
She highlighted the importance of citing famous quotations in writing. Embedded in her response was that citing “famous people” in writing was part of “the right model” and “beautiful writing.” This echoes McPharrel (2011) who argues that some Chinese students use “beautiful words” or famous phrases in their writing to show professionalism. Both Wanlin and Kun’s narrative showed that Chinese graduate students were aware of the different norms of academic writing in their communities of practice, including the community of practice in their previous education in China where formulaic writing was highly valued, and the community in their U.S. graduate programs where independent and critical thinking is expected. Although they were fully fledged participants in their writing community in China by following formula and “safe” way of writing, they have limited participation in their new community of practice in their current graduate programs.

While it is clear that the test-oriented educational system shaped the writing expectations and the value of thinking in students’ writing, some interviewees thought that the size of typical Chinese classes made it difficult for teachers in China to focus on students’ thinking in their writing process. Rui explained,

I think it is because of the size of lab. Yeah for here maybe less than 10 students working in one lab so they try to separate the time. Sometimes maybe two sections or sections. You got to interact with your TA and you can find more problems or you can get more answers than we did in China. Because in China the size is 30 or 40 students in one class. So teachers cannot look after all those. (Rui, first interview, 07/10/2014)

Rui echoed Leedham’s (2014) finding that the large number of students in a typical Chinese classroom made it hard for teachers to engage students in discussion around
writing. Likewise, because they are reading hundreds of essays, it is not manageable for graders to read students’ writing carefully or appreciate their new ideas or thinking.

Students’ responses revealed that most of them were aware of the new writing expectations in the United States involving thinking. Their responses revealed how the test-oriented English teaching influenced the role of thinking in writing training in China and the culture shock they experienced in U.S. graduate schools. However, some students shared how the function of their writing had shifted from getting high scores on exams to expressing ideas and sharing research knowledge. For instance,

Well I guess in China the expectations on English writing is just to pass exam frankly speaking, but here we are doing research we want to write good-quality submissions because people the experts will review the papers you write and you want to get accepted. So it cannot be kidding, you need to be damn serious. (Kun, first interview, 09/06/2014)

When I was writing in China, we always write those articles for exams, very simples topics, which book do you want to read, which city do you want to live in, that kind of things. And you can just write in very casual and simple sentences… but when I came here, writing is like a tool for me to express scientific opinions or findings. These are totally completely different kind of writings. (Xinqin, second interview, 09/24/2014)

Both Kun and Xinqin acknowledged that the role of writing was changing for them. There are many facets to the function of writing. Unlike their previous studies, when they were mainly trained to write for their academic gatekeepers – exam graders - in graduate school they were expected to use writing as a means of disseminating ideas. Embedded in their narratives is the idea that the function of writing transforms from a tool used to pass exams to a tool used to represent and question knowledge (Allison &
Wu, 2001), and express opinions and communicate research findings (Chang & Kanno, 2010).

One interesting note in my interview memos was that when asked about what they found the major differences of writing between China and the United States to be, several of the participants – Jinmei, Rui, and Wanlin -- took a long “pause” time before answering this question and explicitly noted that “it was a good question” or “I may need to think about it.” The extra thinking time, combined with the comments about this question being good or complicated suggests that although writing was a core activity in their graduate studies, they had not reflected on their own experience enough and they were not given many opportunities to share their unique experiences and the major academic culture shock they were struggling with.

Although students frequently compared writing in China and the United States, it was not my intention to criticize one system while praising the other. However, it turned out that their recounting of the differences helped me gain a comprehensive understanding of why independent and critical thinking created academic culture shock in Chinese EAL graduate students’ writing practices. Responses from many participants revealed that the highly valued forms of cultural capital in China, such as the knowledge and skills of test taking and formulaic writing, were not valued in their graduate programs. Some of their previous academic experience and educational qualification failed to help them negotiate the practices of graduate level academic writing in the United States. As I have shown through my analysis, students needed to develop and mobilize new forms of social and cultural capital to navigate this particular kind of academic culture shock. The comparison they made also sheds light on EAL writing research by bringing EAL writing out of the cognitive skills model and into the social context of writing.
Freedom

As mentioned in the previous section, the need to meet graders’ requirements decided the students’ writing style and what kinds of thinking they were doing in writing in China. While in graduate school in the United States, however, they can express different opinions as long as they can justify their arguments with evidence. This is related to another important theme that emerged from my data – freedom. An important contribution this study makes to the existing body of research about EAL writing is to reveal the role of freedom in writing and how it shapes Chinese EAL students’ practices of making meaning of and navigating writing expectations.

As I began talking with students in individual interviews, stories of freedom in writing came up often. I added questions to my second round of interview protocols to ask them to explain and expand on the idea of freedom. Faculty members in my study also revealed Chinese EAL graduate students’ struggle with “freedom.” Several codes emerged across all data sources that indicated how the different academic cultures and writing expectations in the United States provide an array of free choices, shaping students’ current writing practices. My final analysis included 16 quotations coded “China-U.S difference: freedom”, five as “self-dependence”, and four as “Feedback: autonomy.” All three of these codes fall under the umbrella code of “freedom” in this study.

For most student participants, the opportunity to think independently in their writing was juxtaposed with limitations they perceived in their English writing in China. In particular, some student participants characterized their writing in China as “constraining”, “uniform” and lacking freedom. The high levels of autonomy in topic selection, writing styles, and incorporating their own ideas struck many students as confusing at early stages of their programs and even caused “panic.” However, as
socially situated learners, Chinese EAL graduate students in my study, through increasing participation in their “discourse communities” (Gee, 1992, p. 107) and being immersed in this new academic culture, were learning to “be particular kinds of people; that is, to write as academics” (Lave & Wegner, 1991, p. 10).

“You Can Write Whatever You Are Thinking. Then I Got Panic.”

As mentioned in the previous section, while before the participants in my study started graduate study in their current programs, they felt the tests limited their freedom because creativity might lead to low grades. They also realized that they have more autonomy in choosing the topics they want to write and the way they want in graduate school in the United States. Students in my study referred to the freedom of a vast array of options in choosing writing topics, writing styles, and standards of evaluations of written texts. Some students also specifically referred to the genres of free writing and reflection journals.

In terms of freedom of the content of writing, some students had some interesting understandings of expectations of writing content in the Chinese context. The most striking recounting was from Jinmei, who mentioned, “I hear that sometimes that the writing materials cannot just conflict with some Chinese philosophy or Chinese political issues.” (Jinmei, second interview). She revealed that she was discouraged to write about politically sensitive topics in her writing in China. Jinmei further explained how surprised she was to experience the freedom in choosing topics in the United States by making a comparison of her writing experience between China and the United States: “In China what you talk about is very important I think very few instructors can just accept very novel idea or special ideas even though the students may make very solid argument” and “for some topic, we could not mention
in our college entrance exams. It is very political” (Jinmei, first interview, 08/13/2014). Her ideas were echoed by Wanlin:

It is important to relate to the current international and national issues. It shows you are focused on the outside world, you are the future of our country. And also you can if you want to touch the heart of your examiners, you can say good things about yourself your family, then they will think that you are a good girl or a good guy. And for the last one, it is better to use another famous or classical sentence to conclude. Always like “we need to do something” “we are the future of our country. (Wanlin, second interview, 07/31/2014)

Likewise, Qin talked about her perceptions of what was expected to be included in her previous writing in China. She claimed that she was only supposed to write “positive things” and “you don’t share negative things because teachers will think that you are too depressed you know those feelings will transfer to other people and it just cause bad influence and negative influence” (Qin, second interview).

Their reflections on their writing experience in terms of what topics and contents were appropriate to write and how they write provide insights into how students perceive freedom in both China and the United States. For Chinese students in my study, “freedom” in writing became a misfortune in disguise. While most students embraced the relative freedom in academic writing, others showed concerns about writing in the “right” way, and tried to avoid the wrong way. They were used to being told how to write, but in the new academic culture in the United States, most of them seemed to lose sight of the appropriate way of writing and were left to wander around and explore by themselves.

The lack of preparation for graduate-level writing in US institutions, together with the fear of not being able to write properly, has imposed lots of pressure on new
Chinese EAL students in the United States. The transition from following a certain successful formula in writing to a large amount of autonomy was not easy for participants in my study, at least at the early stage of their writing.

Rui further mentioned not only the increased autonomy to navigate writing independently, but also the relatively contrastive assessment standards of writing in two countries. He specifically said in his current graduate program, “Usually different person may have different problems, so you state your program, try to say how you got this problem and how do you fix it. You can say like what I did to try to fix it but I didn’t succeed” (Rui, first interview, 07/10/2014). Later in his program he came to the realization that the answers did not have to be correct, but he had to be able to state the problem and describe how he dealt with it.

Second, the different levels of freedom in writing can be a blessing but also a challenge to many Chinese EAL graduates students. The foreign concept of academic writing at graduate school, or the emphasis on independence in terms of writing and also in doing research seemed to be one of the major sources of confusion in the writing experience of students in my study. Some students complained that there was not much support available to them to help explore the new level of freedom. The transformation from following the “right model” to having freedom also posed emotional challenges to Chinese EAL graduate students in my study. Qin, Xinqin, Rui, and Jinmei expressed the shock and emotional pressures that came with the level of freedom in their writing.

Qin, a Master’s student in the social sciences, expressed her emotional struggles when given unexpected autonomy at the beginning of her program. As she mentioned, “In one of the class the professor asked us to take out a paper just it is free writing. You can write whatever you are thinking. Then I got panic, what kind of
thing can I write?” (Qin, second interview, 08/06/2014). Being new to the genre and clueless about the specific expectations of free writing, she felt unprepared and clueless. She further revealed that in free writing, she was told to write continuously for three to five minutes without regard to spelling, grammar, or topic, which was a low-stakes writing assignment, but she suffered from the new freedom. Qin further expressed her concern about the sudden exposure by mentioning her lack of experience with this new genre of academic writing, “I started to learn English like from ABC, is on my fifth grade it is really late compared to others. And we were trained to write about a topic. There is a title, I don’t think I had free writing” (Qin, second interview, 08/06/2014). In her case, freewriting as a genre was scary.

Embedded in the professor’s instruction was some taken-for-granted assumption that students all know how to do freewriting, including EAL students from other academic cultures who might had no understanding of freewriting. The lack of scaffolding is quite evident in her case.

Qin was not alone. Rui, a second year graduate student in engineering, was also overwhelmed at the beginning when exposed to a lot of freedom in writing a report. He said, “In China it is fixed you just follow the routine to finish the report. Here you kind of have free space for you” (Rui, first interview, 07/10/2014). However, when he started Master’s study in electrical engineering, he said that, “it may cause me feel like there is more freedom. Because you have to do the report do the project, do all by yourself or with your partner to explore something which I didn’t have much experience in China” (Rui, second interview, 08/06/2014). It was clear that Rui was not prepared for writing with this level of autonomy. The exposure to a high level of freedom in writing, coupled with the general expectations referred to under the
previous theme of critical and independent thinking, has problematized these students’ previous writing training and disadvantaged them in their academic study.

Two faculty members, Martina in social sciences and Rebecca in business, also suggested that Chinese graduate students seemed to “need more scaffolding” (Martina, Focus group) and “want more structure than other people” (Rebecca, focus group) in their writing. Specifically they had noticed in communicating with their Chinese graduate students that:

When you say to them, it is up to you, you decide how to organize it, they struggle, they look at you as if to say, why, why? Give me some guidance.

What do you want me to do…when I give them a lot of freedom, they just don’t know what to do with it, they really want a framework, how do you want this put together, in their homework. Do you want us to say X, Y and Z? No, I want you to put them together in a logic way, there are multiple ways this can be done. If you don’t give them a structure, they look like fish out of water.

(Rebecca, focus group)

Embedded in her recounting was that she was encouraging students to explore different ways of organizing their writing, her Chinese EAL graduate students seemed to feel clueless when given freedom, and were eager to get guidance and frameworks from their professors. It also showed that she noticed their struggles in navigating this new academic culture shock.

Kun and Xinqin, two doctoral students, said they had a “hard start” and felt helpless due to lack of mentoring and preparation in their current graduate programs. Specifically Kun said: “At the beginning I felt a hard start. Well I wrote slowly and I wanted to enter the good sentence at the beginning and it took a long time to create a draft.”(Kun, 1st interview, 09/06/2014). Likewise, Xinqin reflected on her first year in
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her current program, saying, “You know we are not native English speakers. I had a really hard time at the first at the beginning two years but later on we gained more experience things have become much better I would say” (Xinqin, 1st interview, 09/09/2014). Their responses showed optimism and also showed that they felt more comfortable with their writing after becoming more familiar with the writing expectations in their programs. In other words, they had shifted from struggling with new academic culture as novice writers to becoming participants in their community.

Although collectively students in my study found it was not easy to navigate their newfound freedom, some students spoke highly about the chance to explore more freedom in their study and research and expressed their excitement about embracing this autonomy. For example, when asked about how he thought about the autonomy, Kun said, “Let me use the word excitement because you create the work, something you want something you really want to say. Right more freedom” (Kun, second interview, 09/27/2014). He also mentioned that “so the most comfortable thing is that you write something that you have prepared for” (Kun, 1st interview, 09/06/2014). This “excitement” and “comfortable” feeling towards autonomy in writing echoes Zhang’s (2011) finding that “academic freedom” is a major motivation for Chinese EAL students to pursue graduate study in Western countries.

**Freedom = Lack of Mentoring?**

Regardless of the level of autonomy these students had in their writing, there seemed to be a lack of mentoring and support that seemed to be a challenge for Chinese international students across research fields. Some student participants felt their professors were not aware of or did not have the resources to understand their unique needs and struggle in terms of navigating freedom – an academic culture shock. Collectively students’ responses also showed that they had not received much
support as EAL international students to make meaning of autonomy and navigate the different levels of freedom in writing.

Some students had experienced the tension between freedom and lack of preparation; as new international EAL graduate students they felt like they needed support from instructors. When asked about why he found writing challenging, Rui said, “I was just not mentored. I mean I can seek for some help, it is just not a usual thing that I would do” (Rui, first interview, 07/10/2014). Rui’s experience confirmed Smith and Smith’s (1999) claim that it is hard for international students to adjust to an educational environment that is “more characterized by independent learning and less instructor supervision and guidance” (Smith & Smith, 1999, p. 66).

Jinmei, a doctoral student in education, was even more critical about the lack of mentoring by referring to professors’ lack of care for international students, saying “Most U.S. instructors think to me they don’t know much and sometimes they don’t even care whether the students know about academic value they don’t care” (Jinmei, first interview, 08/13/2014).

Wanlin, a business major further explained the tensions between some faculty and Chinese EAL graduate students, saying:

When we ask questions some people just blame that we are not good at asking questions. But when we have our first try, we have the very negative feedback. Like some professors will explain things very fast even though they know English is not our first language, they will explain very fast and they are in a hurry to leave. Then our response is very negative then how can we ask them the second time? No way. Then we will study by ourselves. (Wanlin, first interview)
Her response suggested that some Chinese EAL graduate students in her class felt discouraged in answering questions about writing because their first experience was “negative.” She even claimed that one of her professors was “Anti-China” (Wanlin, second interview, 07/31/2014). Surprised at her comments, I asked some probing questions about the reasons to which she responded: “We know why she didn’t like Chinese students because her son could not find a good job. And she thinks because all Chinese people we are so competitive and we grab the jobs. But it is only one professor” (second interview). Her responses to my questions clearly showed that some Chinese EAL graduate students in her program collectively felt the lack of mentoring and even “anti-China” sentiments. These feelings seemed to have negatively affected their experience of navigating writing and discouraged them from communicating with faculty members.

Some other students felt that their professors did not care about them and they had to “take care of themselves.” They also seemed to notice the different roles American and Chinese professors played in students' studies generally, and writing in particular:

Here the advisor is always so busy, sometimes even you have some serious problems, I just have to I kept to keep writing to them to let her know what the problem is. Because I know I have to be responsible to myself. Also this is one of the academic differences. Maybe it has nothing to do with writing, but it has something to do with academic cultural difference in the American campus or the Chinese campus. I think maybe it is not proper to say that Chinese professors are more responsible in this set, but most Chinese professors will tell you what you are supposed to do. (Jinmei, second interview)
Jinmei’s experiences spoke to Shu’s (2006) argument that English teachers in China generally devote their time after class to helping students and answering their questions. This might explain the difference between how teachers use their time in China and in the United States. It seems some participants in this study expected the professors to be more available and give them more mentoring. The frustration that Jinmei, Rui, and other interviewees were experiencing shows that this group of students came to graduate school with the expectations of a closer student-instructor relationship and more mentoring from their instructors. These expectations are the cultural capitals that are valued in Chinese academic culture.

Being exposed to this kind of freedom at the beginning of their programs can result in problems in Chinese EAL graduate students’ writing process. Rui used his personal experience to explain how the academic culture shock can result in a mismatch between students’ perception of writing and professors’ expectations without proper mentoring. In his first semester at graduate school, he was writing a lab report:

The professor said you just go ahead and do the lab and write a pretty simple lab report. I don’t want several pages of report. So I thought it is great it is simple. So I did it really simple but it turned out the professor wanted more. (Rui, first interview, 07/10/2014)

It is clear in his statement that on the one hand he was exposed to a lot of freedom as the professor mentioned that they could write whatever they wanted to write. On the other hand, the seemingly high level of freedom actually was combined with some hidden rules that EAL international students might not be familiar with. As Rui explained further, what the professor really wanted was that “you can save time on writing on all those introduction and other stuff, but you got to dig into your topic and
try to provide more on what you actually did, what the problem is, and all those
calculation, you got to write in a pretty accurately.” This finding is consistent with
Van de Poel and Gasiorek’s (2012) claim that discrepancies between students’ and
instructors’ expectations of academic writing may result in poor evaluation of
students’ writing by instructors and student discouragement. However, by interacting
with professors and asking for clarification, Rui was able to meet the expectations and
“do better” next time. Like many other EAL students, Rui, by interacting with other
community members and apprenticing with more experienced writer – professors --
gradually developed his competence in English writing (Chang & Kanno, 2010).

Without clear instruction and mentoring, students might be sandwiched between
the seemingly free requirements in their new academic contexts and some hidden
expectations of writing. This finding is consistent with Casanave’s (2004) claim that
EAL students need to make efforts to clearly understand what their professors really
want, and ask for clarifications to unveil hidden or tacit criteria that even their
professors might not be fully aware.

“Most of My Papers Are Basically His[Advisor’s] Writing.”

While the general response from my student participants involved confusion from
freedom in writing and the “excitement” of embracing freedom when they transitioned
smoothly into the new academic culture, one student experienced the detrimental
effect of not having enough freedom when co-authoring with their professors. Xinqin,
a student in the medical school, referred to her advisor as the “chief editor” of her
writing, and generally he would “rewrite” instead of helping her revise her paper. As
she mentioned

I cannot say that he is a control freak but he likes to dominate things you
know. Even though I have written the sentence pretty well the paper is well
organized, even though it is well written by English speaking students, he would still rewrite everything. He just wanted to say things in his way so most of my papers are basically his writing. (Xinqin, first interview, 09/09/2014)

To prove her point, she showed me her manuscript with her advisor’s feedback. In the document, there was heavy revision on most sentences, including structure, word choice, and clarity. In her case, she had limited autonomy and her writing had “not improved much”. She showed her concerns of not being able to get adequately trained in writing. It was clear from her recounting that she was caught in a highly emotional debate as to how to navigate this lack of freedom. Her recounting echoed Friedman’s (1987) argument that EAL graduate students suffered most when the supervision of their advisors lacked sufficient guidance, in Xinqin’s case, lack of constructive feedback.

In conclusion, my participants’ narratives clearly suggested that as novice writers in new communities of practices, they still have very limited participation in their writing community in navigating academic freedom in writing. For example, some students found it hard to understand, make sense of, and explore the new academic culture. Adding complexity to this issue is that to transition into the new academic culture defined by freedom, they generally do not have an adequate understanding of the new writing conventions, along with a lack of mentoring. Hence, some felt lost and clueless, and suffered emotional pressure from the uncertainty of navigating freedom. However, some student participants in my study were excited that the autonomy in writing has enhanced their chances of improving writing. Although they had “a hard start” (Rui, first interview), they were able to successfully navigate freedom in writing and gradually move from very limited participation in their
community of practice to more central participation and embrace the academic freedom.

“Academic freedom” is a major motivation for Chinese EAL students to pursue graduate study in the United States (Zhang, 2011). However, not much existing literature has documented how professors and higher educational institutions help new EAL international students make meaning of autonomy and navigate this new academic culture shock in their writing practices. This finding can contribute to the literature on how Chinese EAL graduate students make sense of and explore freedom—an academic culture shock.

**Sharing Personal Feeling.**

Another theme that emerged as I asked students about student participants’ past writing experiences and new writing expectations in the United States was sharing personal feelings. Consistent with Leki’s (2007) and Carson’s (1997) findings, my student participants showed strong reactions about sharing personal feelings in most genres of academic writing, including free writing, reflection journal, and even email writing. Qin, Xinqin, Jinmei, and Wanlin identified sharing personal feelings as one of the most striking academic culture shocks. As mentioned by Xinqin “if I want to tell about my personal experience or personal feelings towards something it is even harder than writing a research paper” (Xinqin, first interview, 09/09/2014). Wanlin echoed Xinqin and noted the different perceptions of sharing personal feeling between American students and Chinese students, saying “Maybe it is because they are more outgoing. Because if you share a story you share the experience of yourself. We Chinese won’t do that” (Wanlin, first interview). Likewise, Qin associated her discomfort with sharing personal feelings with the conservative Chinese culture, and her discomfort is described below:
My paper was on how I perceive the movie, while my peers wrote a lot about themselves. I talked a lot about the movie, while my peers reflected a lot about her personal experience, and a lot of feelings and emotions. I thought. I mean I don’t know. Coming from a really conservative culture, I am really not comfortable sharing those personal experiences. (Qin, first interview, 07/16/2014)

When asked about whether it was her professor’s expectation for students to share personal feelings, Qin said “I think the expectation is to combine your personal experience and what you saw from a movie. But I chose to incline more to the content of the movie while my American peers did write a lot about themselves” (Qin, first interview, 07/16/2014).

For both Wanlin and Qin, the cultural values of keeping personal feelings to themselves define who they are as Chinese. Some students also connected their reluctance to share personal feelings with the educational training they had received in China. They attributed the difficulty in sharing personal feelings to their lack of vocabulary choices and concerns about over exposing themselves and offending people. However, as much as they struggled, some students were able to negotiate the boundary of what to share and what to keep to themselves. As Qin mentioned

Yes I started to feel better at academic writing because I know what I can share, I know what my professors will appreciate but not cross my personal line. So I will try to find something that can attract my reader but not get me over exposed. (Qin, second interview, 08/06/2014)

She was trying to meet teachers’ expectations and to express a personal stance that has developed as she approached particular topics. Her change from limited to fuller participation in social practices involving how Chinese EAL graduate students share
personal feelings demonstrates the concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 27). Qin was able to transition from a state in which she “got panic” to writing a text that her professors will appreciate but which will also not “cross personal lines” by not “overexposing” herself in her writing. Specifically, Qin was socialized into more recognized central participation in the social practices of her communities in terms of sharing personal feelings in her writing. Qin negotiated some of the freedom of sharing personal feelings in her own ways and what it meant to be free in academic writing.

In summary, most student and faculty participants highlighted three major “academic culture shocks” Chinese EAL graduate students had to navigate: Thinking critically and independently, freedom, and sharing personal feelings. As Darryal and Toh (2010) argue, there is a generally disjuncture between ESL students’ prior and present academic writing expectations, which contribute to the struggles faced by ESL writers as they “attempt to reconcile the voices of the writing classes with the subsequent demands of their academic courses” (p. 162). They had been socializing themselves into the new writing community in their current programs. They also highlighted the significance of navigating social relationships to meet writing expectations. In the next section, I present findings related to how Chinese EAL graduate students navigate social relationships in writing.

**Navigating Social Relationships in Writing**

Another intriguing finding is about Chinese EAL graduate students’ experiences of navigating social relationships in their writing practices. Given the social nature of writing and the relational intricacies involved in EAL students’ writing practices, it was not surprising that most of my participants felt that one aspect of academic
writing expectations was to navigate social relations in the process of writing. Writing is an interactive social practice (Casanave, 2004; Nystrand, 1989; Thompson, 2001,). More specifically, “writing interactions happen with present and absent others through discussions and readings and with oneself in different guises as well” (Casanave, 2004, p. 156). Additionally, social interaction can help students “learn a great deal about the writing process and can serve as a motivating factor for students” (Weigle, 2002, p. 204)

As students recounted their experience of writing at U.S. graduate schools, they provided vivid descriptions of how they understand writing as a practice in their academic community. To Chinese EAL students in my study, writing involves a lot of social interactions with their advisors, instructors, writing group members, and peers. Their reflections on the experience of social interaction in writing were a mix of anxiety, uncertainty, indirectness, and painful transition. For some, positive social relations meant considering their potential audiences, showing politeness, and avoiding offending people, especially in the form of email communication. For others, navigating social relations meant solving conflicts in writing, especially in collaborative writing. This section provides insights into what “social relations” meant to students in this study and how they navigated social relations. I identified 14 excerpts coded “content of expectations: audience,” six coded “politeness,” seven coded “challenge: email” and 16 coded “group writing: conflicts.” These excerpts captured how Chinese EAL graduate students in my study navigated social relationships in their writing practices.

**Picturing Audience.**

In analyzing my data from the social practice point of view of literacy, I was able to understand the way my participants’ notions of audience changed as they were
being socialized into more appropriate participation in the social practices of their communities. Literacy, including writing, is “not the narrow ability to deal with texts, but the broad ability to deal with people” (Brandt, 1990, p. 14). Specifically in writing, people include their “real, imagined and imaginary audiences” (Casanave, 2004, p. 159), stakeholders in their writing assessment, and peers. In this study audiences are grouped together to reflect Chinese EAL graduate students’ social relationships with people in their community.

Students in my study were fully aware that they had to bring in the readers’ view in their writing. They kept in mind that they must involve the potential reader collaboratively in the development of the text. In most cases, students, including Rui, Jianhua, Kun, Jinmei, and Wanlin, highlighted the importance of picturing their audience⁶ - social groups of people with “similar interests, goals and activities” or “discourse communities” (Gee, 1992, p. 107) in the writing process. It is evident that to unpack and demystify the expectations about academic writing in graduate programs, students had to think about what their professors, and even journal article reviewers, expect to see in their papers Rui mentioned that in course papers, people in his field – electrical engineering, used a lot of images and pictures. He reflected:

For the project professors doesn’t have to know all about what you did I mean he just give us the topic and all other things need we are doing to, all other things, so we have to write it as if the professors knows nothing what we are taking about, pretends you are teaching something but you are prepared. (Rui, first interview)

According to Rui, he would keep in mind his professor’s understanding of his topic and expectations, then he would write accordingly. He further mentioned that he

⁶ In this dissertation audience refers to people who read students’ writing for academic purposes, including writing for courses, conference presentations, and publications.
would try to make his writing “beautiful” for his professor by “arranging the pictures, aligning the whole stuff really like easy to readers for professors to understand” (first interview). It seemed true for many student participants in my study like Rui that their bottom-line evaluators were their professors, and they would write in ways that conformed to what they thought the teachers expected (Lea & Street, 2000).

Jianhua, another Master’s student in the STEM field, did not realize that he was actually picturing audience until I asked some probing questions. He further explained that instead of “going blind” in writing, by which he meant proceeding without a plan or outline, he planned ahead and kept everything organized for his audience, saying

Actually that was for the audience. I don’t want to write anything that is a chaos. I can understand this because when I read papers I can have such feeling if other paper is written not in a logic order that might be headache for me to understand to grasp the core idea in a short time. So that is for the audience part....As my professor told me, my professor in China told me that the core part of a report you can remove all other things but you have to tell your audience what is your contribution what are you thinking (Jianhua, first interview, 07/18/2014)

His recounting demonstrated his awareness of readers, and furthermore, his plans to make his writing easy to understand for readers. He also used his own experience as a reader to explain his desire not to make his writing a “headache” for readers. This interactive process with his unseen partners was intriguing.
When asked about what kind of feedback he found the most helpful, Kun said everything is helpful, but the most helpful feedback organized ideas, especially in writing for publication. Specifically, he mentioned that

The background should be very short, provide a basic review of the information for people who are new in the field.... And sometimes you need to discuss your ideas in details, so you’d better run into discussion in categories steps, so when people finish reading your paper they remember how many steps and situations you have discussed, and then you need a conclusion sentence at the end. (Kun, second interview, 09/27/2014)

While all three STEM students in my study highlighted their inclusion of audience in their writing process, and catered their writing to their audience’s knowledge and preference, students in other disciplines especially Jinmei and Qin, two students in the social sciences, were also aware of meeting the expectations of their direct audience – professors.

Jinmei, a doctoral student in education, reflected on how she learned to make sense of audience. She argued that initially she was not aware that she should be picturing her audience, and she failed to meet the expectations of the evaluators-professors.

When I was writing, especially at the beginning, I seldom took my readers in mind, for example I just wrote what I wanted to say. I never thought who would read it, what they would know about my topic, how much they know about my topic. But later when we had a writing course I know that I need to take readers into consideration right before I start writing….you have to assume that your readers may not know about it. So for me as I said I always assume too much I
assume my readers may be interested in this my readers may know this. (Jinmei, second interview)

Her evolving perception of herself as a writer showed she started to position herself in the social context of writing, and to understand the relations between academic writing and the constitution of herself as a writer. Jinmei and other EAL graduate students’ experiences indicated that as members of an academic community, they had to learn “new discourse practices and adopting new and changing perceptions of themselves as writers” (Leedham, 2014, p. 88). Likewise, when talking about their perception of the evaluators of their writing, some participants indicated that they had gone through a transition from being blind to the readers to actively involving their readers’ perception in their writing.

This was also the case for Wanlin, a Master’s student in Finance. Although some of her reports were not written for academic purposes, she still had to keep her audience—in her case her clients—in mind. She explained:

For business school when you write a report, you have to do what the client wants you to do. For business school it is also about fancy but for us fancy is not about the words, our fancy is about clearness and logic. That’s why we have to highlight and bold some words. We don’t have time to find all the information. We just have to get to the answers directly. (Wanlin, second interview)

There are multiple levels of picturing audience in the students’ writing practices. Their visible audience is generally professors who are the gatekeepers of their writing. Xinqin, Kun and Jinmei, who had experience writing for publication, also mentioned their imagined or imaginary audience: journal manuscript and conference proposal reviewers, as well as grant reviewers. Additionally there was a disciplinary variation in their practices of picturing audience and writing expectations. Unlike Wanlin in
social sciences, students in the medical field, where most course papers consisted of formulas and very simple and straightforward explanations, were more concerned about correct results and how to present their work to the audience in a straightforward manner. Wei shared with me a piece of his homework for his Master’s program. In the three-page homework assignment, there were only a few English sentences. He also mentioned that he was told not to write too much because the formulas and correct answers would be enough.

As discussed here, picturing audience is one major aspect of understanding social interactions in Chinese EAL graduate students’ writing process. Adding to the complexity is that some students were concerned about politeness, which I will explore in the following section.

**Politeness in Writing**

Another salient dimension that emerged during the interviews was the students’ experiences and perspectives of what it means to be polite, and consequently how it informed their experience navigating social relations in their writing process. Interestingly, when it comes to meeting academic writing expectations, one major struggle for my interviewees came not from writing itself, but from their confusion over how to communicate with people without going against their Chinese values of politeness.

“I Don’t Want to Offend Them [Professors].”

Being polite seemed to be the primary concern in students’ communication with people in their academic community. Several of the participants shared concerns about how to interact with people in ways that are not “offensive” or “impolite.” Their shared experiences and stories provide insights for understanding Chinese EAL graduate students’ practices of navigating social relations involved in writing.
No matter what program they were in, what graduate level they were at, and what content they were communicating with people in their community, most Chinese EAL graduate students in my study pinpointed the importance of being polite and appropriate. The lack of understanding of writing expectations coupled with their concerns about being “polite,” “appropriate,” “not rude,” and seeking “not to offend professors” put a big emotional burden on students.

Writing is a way to understand social relations with professors and peers. Xinqin, Jinmei, Wanlin, and Jianhua said they felt a level of reluctance to communicate with professors to ask for clarification of assignments or feedback, or to discuss any dissatisfaction they had in their writing. Their reluctance mainly came from the desire to avoid impoliteness and avoid offending their professors, which are cultural taboos in Chinese culture.

Jinmei explained, “At the very beginning of the program, I was so worried about offending the instructors or teachers.” Her concerns persisted through both rounds of interviews. She explicitly explained that because of her educational background, at the beginning she was concerned about showing impoliteness, which affected her ability to communicate with and get help from professors. Likewise, Martina, a faculty member in social sciences, revealed that she felt her Chinese graduate students “wanted to write in a way that is pleasing.” (Focus group) This also is connected with the findings discussed under the theme of “thinking” that indicate that these Chinese students generally viewed professors as gatekeepers and would write to cater to their professors’ preferences, or to please their professors. This is also consistent with Li’s (2007) research finding that novice graduate students’ writing is influenced by the power-infused relationship between students and the institutional context, faculty included.
I asked Jinmei if she was trying to please teachers in her writing, and she said she did “at least I don’t want to offend them. I don’t want to please them but I don’t want to offend them.” She further said that she was more concerned about not being a polite student than getting a dissatisfactory score. The good student image she was trying to build played a significant role in her communication with professors. Her experiences suggested that the power dynamics between faculty and students posed some pressure on her. She further said that she just wanted to “seriously” show the professors that although she believed she was not good at writing at the beginning, she wanted to be a “good student.” Although the existing literature on EAL writing shows that international students’ academic success depends on a great extent on their interaction with their native instructors (Zimmerman, 1995), many Chinese EAL graduate students in my study, including Jinmei, were reluctant to interact with their professors in fear of “offending” them. This finding echoes Yan and Berliner’s (2009) argument that Chinese international students generally tend to “converse less and even avoid interaction with their advisors” (p. 949). The lack of communication with faculty makes it difficult for EAL graduate students to understand and negotiate academic writing expectations. Some of them were concerned about offending faculty because they were not familiar with the appropriate way of communicating, and some felt reluctant to bother their faculty with “stupid questions” (Jinmei, first interview). Writing was also not only a practice that was associated with different subject areas and disciplines, but also with “broader institutional discourses” (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 368) and power relations. When engaged in the negotiation of power relations, writing and identity, most Chinese students in my study were not active agents yet. They were still gradually adapting to the value and knowledge systems of academic writing in epistemologically different academic context with some
negotiation (Zhang, 2011).

The theme of politeness includes interaction with both professors and peers. For example, Jinmei expressed her reluctance to comment on peers’ posts on class discussion boards, saying, “I can’t stop comparing my writing with the writing of my American peers…. I will read their posts on class discussion board, but sometimes I don’t know how to respond appropriately sometimes I just write one or two sentences” (second interview). This showed she was cautious in giving feedback, worried about not giving “appropriate” responses to her peers’ writing.

Martina in social sciences suggested that her Chinese graduate students were not comfortable criticizing each other’s work. However, when given an opportunity to offer feedback on one student’s work, they were able to critically read that piece of writing and offer critical feedback. Specifically she said:

What I heard was that they are apprehensive to be critical of other students’ work. They are mostly looking for surface level errors. So grammar, spelling. they are not critically looking at idea. But interesting enough, last week the whole class all looked at one student’ writing….They had no trouble doing it because we were all looking at one [one student’s writing]together...So all of a sudden, they were able to be critical. It was not surface level. It was all the stuff that I look for. (Martina, Focus group)

Her response suggested that the concern of being polite had constrained Chinese graduate students’ ability to understand writing and make progress in their writing. She further indicated that with proper guidance and they were comfortable with the format of peer review, Chinese graduate students in her class were able to review classmate’s writing critically instead of staying at “surface level”.
Some students, including Xinqin and Wanlin, directly associated their uncertainty of being polite with a lack of understanding of “polite words.” Wanlin frequently mentioned how the lack of proper words had affected Chinese EAL students at large, and herself in particular, in communicating with people in a polite way. Xinqin expressed that being exposed to a new academic environment, she was afraid of being rude to peers unintentionally, saying “some friends especially American friends they will not say you are rude. They will not say it they will just walk away they will not let you know” (Xinqin, second interview).

In conclusion, for students in my study the notions of “being polite” and “not offending” were linked to being respectful to people in their writing community, which, in turn, were anchored in primary social interactions reflective of a person’s social and cultural backgrounds. However, “politeness” also could constrain their development in that some student participants were focusing on catering to instructors’ preferences and were reluctant to engage in writing discussions with instructors and peers. For them writing became a solitary task.

“Email Writing Can Be a Problem.”

Email writing was not a category initially identified in the first round of interviews, but it emerged in the data as a major way of communicating writing expectations for students in my study. Hence in the second round of interview, I probed their experience of using email to communicate with people.

Not surprisingly, email was a more comfortable way for the students to communicate with professors in their writing process because they felt they could express themselves more clearly in email than in face-to-face communication. For instance, when asked about the most comfortable way of communicating with professors, Xinqin chose email for the following reason:
I think it is better for me to send them email instead of talking in person. Because if I want to say something but the word is not coming up to my mind I have time to use Google Translator for other references to make my ideas clear in my email. When I talk with them I sometimes I just find it is difficult for me to express myself as clear as writing especially in a short meeting can I just ask you a quick question or can I just speak to you about something in one or two sentences. Sometimes I found it very hard to express myself very clearly.

(Xinqin, first interview)

Xinqin’s reflection was consistent with Casanave’s (2004) finding that electronic communication can benefit students in many ways. Email communication has enhanced her opportunities to communicate with professors, especially when she felt it challenging to pick the right words and make ideas clear. Likewise, Qin also chose to send emails to communicate with professors. She found it effective to communicate with professors in emails because they generally responded in a timely manner.

I also asked faculty interviewees how their Chinese EAL graduate students communicated with them. Rebecca, a faculty member in business, noticed that Chinese graduate students in her class generally sent her emails to communicate, specifically saying, “They seem to be shy to ask questions in class. It is usually I ask ‘do you have any questions’. ‘No’. When I walk out, I have 10 emails” (Rebecca, focus group). However, Wang, a professor who was originally from China, experienced contrastive ways of communication with his Chinese EAL graduate students, saying, “They are uneasy to speak to different kind of people. In my class, my Chinese students are more active and they are waiting to communicate with me. Sometimes they so send emails but mostly they just walk into my office without reserving a time”(Wang, focus group). He further mentioned that most Chinese EAL
graduate students obtained the linguistic competence to communicate with people, which was shared by two other faculty. Their responses collectively suggested that their Chinese EAL graduate students apprentices already had the required level of linguistic capital to meet the academic writing demands in their disciplines.

Two faculty members had witnessed different ways their Chinese EAL graduate students communicated with professors based on professors’ language backgrounds and ethnic backgrounds. They indicated that Chinese graduate EAL students were more likely to have face-to-face communication with Chinese professors while they used email as major communication means with American professors. Wang’s recounting was closely related to another theme in this study – friendship-based peer support that I will explore in the next section in this chapter. Also his response indicated that since many faculty members and graduate students at his department were from China, his Chinese students were aware of the unique cultural capital they had available in their program and made use of it in their community.

Rui, a Masters’ student in engineering, noted that he would send well-organized emails to professors if he were not satisfied with their feedback. Additionally, he noted the appropriate ways to email professors by explicitly explaining his ideas.

If I am not satisfied with some of the parts I may just write an email and state all my opinions why I think it should be like this not like that. And what I thought the time when I was doing the project and when I was doing the writing. And give my explanations, one, two, three points, and just state them out explicitly so it is also like write a portfolio. (Rui, second interview)

Likewise, Wanlin also noted the importance of organizing an email, saying “When I write email, I like list every question, one, two, three. I know even we cannot write
English very well we can make it clear and professors like it this way. And the shorter, the better.” (Wanlin, first interview)

While many interviewees mentioned that email is a major and convenient way of communicating, and they noted the significance of organizing emails for their audience, writing emails in their academic community seems to have been an emotional stress to some Chinese EAL graduate students. Jinmei, Xinqin, Wanlin, and Rui highlighted their struggles in email writing. They explained that it was challenging for them to write emails to people in a polite way, as they were not familiar with nuances in English language. They wanted to follow the American style of email communication but they often times found themselves clueless. Their concerns are as follows:

And learn how to write personal emails. That was the first thing we need to learn because I think most Chinese students don’t know how to write email in a good manner. Because we don’t want to be rude, but we don’t know how to write politely or appropriately so you should always not talk to a professor starting with a verb, like please do something, or I want to see you this afternoon. You should say shall I schedule or meeting or can I do something? So I think that is important to most international students. (Xinqin, second interview)

Xinqin seemed to be extremely careful about what language she chose and tried to follow the American conventions of writing emails. Her responses also suggested that the intricacies of email communication should be brought up to all international students who were not familiar with the American convention of email writing.

When asked about what resources they drew upon to solve the problem of writing appropriate emails, it turned out that most of them sought help from their Chinese peers. Although email writing was not directly connected to academic writing, many
student and faculty participants identified email writing as the major way for communicating academic writing expectations. For some students it was the only way to ask for clarification of academic writing assignments, as they might be reluctant to have face-to-face communication with faculty members. To fully understand how Chinese EAL graduate students participated in writing in their disciplinary communities, I had to include email writing in my dissertation. For example, Xinqin said that she would seek help from “senior students” and “my husband taught me a lot because he spend eight years time here in the U.S. so he would remind me that you are not saying things in a polite way”. Like Xinqin, most students used their social networks, consisting of peers, spouses, and friends, to navigate email writing.

This finding on email communication partly echoes Casanave’s (2004) findings about the benefits of electronic communication. To truly understand and support EAL students in their writing, we need to explore their means of navigating social relations in writing. This finding can shed light on how electronic communication as a form of navigating social relations can affect students’ writing practices.

“I Don’t Want to feel As If We Were Bullying One of Our Teammates.”

This study contributes to understanding the complexity of social relationship building in writing by exploring the ways the students navigated the difficult task of writing in groups, a common activity in U.S. graduate schools. Some existing research has documented the benefits of group writing at graduate schools. Specifically group writing involving two or more people committed to one written text (Ens, Boyd, Matczuk, & Nickerson, 2011), can create a synergistic dynamic unique to collaborative relationships at the graduate level. It can help students develop better understanding of the craft of writing, knowledge construction and culture from different perspectives for EAL students (Nixon, 2007).
The students provided a nuanced interpretation regarding solving social conflicts, specifically conflicts around writing in groups. While some students thought highly of the value of group writing, especially for publication, most students’ response was a combination of the desire to understand group dynamics, frustration over conflicts, and meeting professor’s expectations and struggle.

To varying extents, five of my student interviewees provided descriptions of their collaborative working experiences, especially conflicts and tensions in graduate school. More specifically Qin, Jianhua, Jinmei, Wanlin, and Kun talked about conflicts in negotiating roles, structuring the process of group writing projects, and negotiating different opinions.

When asked about the advantages of collaborative writing, Kun, a computer scientist, replied that it synergized several people’s expertise and skill sets toward a publishable piece of writing and could “speed up” the writing process by allowing the writers to provide feedback to each other. He further mentioned in the second interview that writing speed is one aspect of quality writing. However, he also mentioned the tensions in group writing resulting from different writing styles:

I would say that different people have different writing skills writing styles something they like something they don’t like. And you see conflicts in group writing. Let me give you an example. If I put a figure in a way that I like, someone wants to review the section and looked at the figure and they don’t like it and they ask you to change. Sometimes I am ok to change but sometimes I am not ok to change, that is a problem. (Kun, second interview)

In addition to group writing tension related to different writing styles, most of the participants’ experiences suggested that group members’ cultural values around group
work were reinforced in their collaborative writing process. To varying extents, they experienced some levels of dissatisfaction and tensions in group writing because people from different cultures tended to negotiate writing in fundamentally different ways. Qin, Wanlin, and Jinmei were the most verbal of the informants when asked about their group writing experience, and their comments indicated that they were highly aware of their behaviors and the difference between them and other students. For example, Qin gave a nuanced description of conflicts in her group writing experience, saying,

There was something really dramatic but it will only happen in the United States, not in China. Like I don’t think we will face the conflicts. Like the other two teammates are from the United States, I even witnessed like twice that they were just talking with a really negative attitude. (Qin, first interview)

In most cases, students in my study acknowledged the social aspects of academic culture shock when they were put in a group that mixed international and domestic students. Their experiences point to cultural differences and distinct meanings that are important to recognize and utilize for negotiating specific constructs of group writing, particularly in relation to solving conflicts. Qin associated “fighting” and “arguing” in group writing with the risk of “bullying” team members and said she felt uncomfortable in her multicultural interaction with American peers:

Like fighting arguing. Yeah so I got really I didn’t know what to do [because] I was just sitting next to them [two American students]. I don’t want to feel as if we were bullying one of our teammates but at the same time I wanted to point out what she did wrong. But at the end I didn’t say anything. It was just the two American students fighting. (Qin, first interview)

Qin monitored herself carefully so as not to precipitate conflict within the group and
showed a perceived need for a positive group climate (Carson & Nelson, 1996). This point of view reflected how her upbringing in both China and Japan – two cultures that emphasize harmony and avoiding conflicts, affected the way she negotiated social relations in a culturally and socially conscious manner. This is consistent with Carson and Nelson’s (1996) finding that Asian students generally were not comfortable criticizing others’ work, lending credence to the depiction of Asian students as seekers of group harmony.

In a similar vein, Jinmei spoke at length about her experiences negotiating writing with her group members. An analysis of her responses of her group writing experience revealed that her self perception of having “clear ideas” but being “disadvantaged at writing,” combined with her identity of being a strict former teacher in China, added several layers of tension to her group writing experience. Jinmei described an “unpleasant” group writing experience with one American and one Russian student:

*When we discussed the introduction part I may say this part needs to be improved in this part, and the American classmate may say she didn’t think so and she thinks it is perfect this part, then maybe that part needs improvement. Then we will ask the Russian student what do you think because we are three in one group. Generally she would say I know nothing about it you two decide. So we can never get agreement. And I think they may think I am too picky and I think they prefer to use this word. I am too, how to say, they say I am not tolerant. They say I always say this is not good, that is not good, we need more improving. For them they prefer to say nice job very nice, never any suggestive or constructive ideas. (Jinmei, first interview)*

Jinmei indicated that she was eager to offer her opinions and sought constructive input
from peers. She was bothered that some group members were reluctant to “take sides” and may have withdrawn from contributing their ideas. However, she felt that being critical or “picky” could be counterproductive for building strong relationships with her peers because being critical to peers’ writing could lead to “impoliteness.” Hence change from more marginal to fuller participation in her community was not without pain. Additionally Jinmei’s response problematized Carson and Nelson’s (1996) argument that Asian EAL students would feel reluctant to challenge people and seek harmony. Clearly a diversified Chinese student body in my study had resulted in different ways of approaching group work. For Jinmei, a veteran English teacher in China and now a Ph.D. student in education, she was able to take side and point out the weaknesses in her group writing. Kun, Rui and Xinqin’s responses also indicated that although they were newcomers in their disciplines, they were not participating as marginalized members and they were able to voice their opinions in group writing. Hence the traditional way of viewing all Asian students as a homogeneous group might fail to capture the authentic experiences of Chinese students in navigating social relationships.

Both Jinmei and Qin described their experience of group conflicts and expressed their different experiences with group writing in multicultural contexts. Experiences like this created tensions and constraints in their group writing experience, including how they conceptualized collaborative work in a social context and how they negotiated their roles and responsibilities in the progress of writing.

Group writing can be even more challenging when there are time conflicts between group writing and other commitments, such as job hunting:

Sometimes I am so angry with my school. They blame that we don’t spend enough time in job searching. Don’t they know that those who are very think are
good students who are good at job searching are actually the very selfish one in
the group because we sacrifice ourselves for them. Everyone has to do job
searching. If you just fly away and don’t leave any word, then we have to finish
your work. (Wanlin, second interview)

The uneven distribution of work in group writing caused dissatisfaction. It became
more complicated when the professor or institution failed to identify the problem.

**Solving Conflicts in Group Writing**

It is clear that group writing for Chinese graduate EAL students was not without
struggle and pain. There could be lots of personal and cultural conflicts in the process
of negotiating writing tasks, contributions and writing style. Some Chinese students
chose to keep silent, endure the conflicts, and seek harmony, while other students
would seek help from authority figures, mainly their professors. Some students found
it easy to handle conflicts in their writing group if they could involve their advisors or
other professors. For example Kun said, “Well I guess this is the problem in any group
writing. Well in my group the solution is very simple. So we go to the advisor, just
make a decision, and everybody is happy” (Kun, second interview).

Some students chose to keep silent when faced with group writing conflicts,
however. As Wanlin mentioned, it was very common for some Chinese students to
maintain harmony by working more and taking the opportunity to learn more:

Some Chinese classmates explained to me that the more they you work the more
you study. I don’t like it. I think it is about justice. I want to find a job too and I
feel so tired. And if you are the only one who disagrees with the situation you
don’t have support and you can’t write to your professor because it will be
embarrassing. (Wanlin, second interview)
Her response demonstrated that some Chinese EAL graduate students’ reluctance to report conflicts is coupled with the concern of being embarrassed. Qin also expressed her discomfort in sharing group writing conflicts with course instructors even though she fully understood it was part of the writing expectations. She said:

The professor wanted us to write our thoughts about our team member’s work, so it is like you have to evaluate them and what kind of role they played in the group project, and like if I were in China I don’t think I will ever say anything negative about my team members, but I know my professors will appreciate honesty of course and some conflicts and those kind of things that we have learned from the books. So I just described what happened between our members. We were doing great but I saw some minor conflicts so I just wrote it down. But if it is in China I don’t think people will write down oh my team had conflicts or anything like that. (Qin, second interview)

The slice of Qin’s story presented above illustrated some of the complex and nuanced ways that cultural models shaped how Chinese students came to view conflicts in particular ways. Adding to the complexity of the issue is that students felt they were put in a dilemma: on the one hand, they were reluctant to report the group conflicts or even talking negatively about their group writing; on the other hand, they knew that their professors wanted them to include the group conflicts, explicit or implicit, in their writing.

Some faculty members in my study also expressed their concerns that some group writing was “dysfunctional”. For instance Rebecca said:

Unfortunately it is that they take divided conquer approach…. So the whole idea of them working together and learning from each other goes out of the window.

It is interesting because I had a team, and they conducted academic dishonesty
in the solutions menu. And when I nailed them on it, they were the first one to say I have nothing to do with it I shouldn’t fail this assignment. To which my response was: “you were here as a team, it is your responsibility to know what is going on in the team, and if you are just dumping this on one person, sorry you are failing too… so I did find that some of our teams are a little dysfunctional. (Rebecca, focus group)

Such manifestations of different perceptions of group work distribution caused confusion and disagreement in collaborative writing among both students and faculty members in my study. From students’ perspective, if they had finished their portion of the group writing, they were done instead of being responsible for the collective text. The intricacies and nuances of group writing like those identified in this study revealed that faculty and students should understand the social and interactive aspects of writing to address the challenges and problems EAL international students face in their writing practices (Casaneva, 2004).

As discussed in this section, given the social nature of writing, participants in my study had complex experiences navigating social relationships in their writing practices. Nurtured in Chinese culture, they had their own ways of dealing with social relationships, which may be at odds with social practices in U.S. graduate schools. For some, picturing their audience was a way for them to improve in their writing practice; showing politeness and avoiding offending people was crucial in navigating writing expectations. Some students used email communication as the major way to communicate about writing expectations with professors, and they struggled with the proper methods of email communication at the beginning, but were able to use their social network to improve it. For some students, the biggest challenges resulted from the tensions in group writing. My analysis based on my theoretical lens that writing is
a social practice and is imbued with different relations (Lave, & Wenger, 1991; Gee, 1992) clearly indicated that to successfully meet writing expectations, Chinese EAL graduate students had to and started to negotiate social relationships with their audience, peers and professors, as well as group members. Their gradual attunement was built upon their engaged participation in their academic discourse community. Hence this finding can shed light on EAL writing research in terms of navigating social relationships in writing practices.

Resources and Strategies

In this section I examine student participants’ access to and use of various resources and strategies to understand and further meet academic writing expectations. Student participants in my study engaged a variety of people in their social network to support their writing, including close friends (especially friends from their own home country), other international students, staff, and faculty.

Peer Support.

When I asked student participants to identify and describe resources and strategies that they considered to be helpful for their writing, most of them mentioned support from peers, especially friendship-based peer support. Jinmei, Xinqin, Rui, and Jianhua revealed that they were not seeking help outside their community of international students. They asked for help from their friends, senior students, or peers instead of seeking help from their professors or institutional support, including writing consulting services and writing workshops. They mobilized their social capital and cultural capital to understand Chinese EAL students’ writing practices in the United States. It seems Chinese EAL graduate students in my study were not willing to transcend the professor-student hierarchical relationship, perhaps because they felt there was a lack of mentoring.
Jinmei recounted her lack of understanding of the program requirements in terms of writing, saying, “I don’t know the whole picture of the program writing requirements” (first interview). As she entered graduate school in the United States, she knew that she was expected to actively write and publish, but she did not understand the specific writing expectations and did not know “where to find dissertations of other doctoral students who have graduated from my school” (Jinmei, first interview), and she was not aware of what resources were available, not to mention how to take advantage of them in her writing process.

Jinmei described her writing at the beginning as “frustrating,” but she became quite animated when talking about her interaction with international peers in writing and the support they had provided her:

I also have a very good help although we don’t know each other well. She is from Saudi Arabia. When she knew I was struggling she volunteered to help me because she said she had her masters degree in U.S. she said she totally understand my situation because she had the same experience. (Jinmei, first interview)

Jinmei later explained that if she had to submit papers to “responsible” and “strict” instructors, she would email them to this female friend and seek feedback. To her, peers like this international student were nonjudgmental readers, and could be a buffer before she sent her written texts to the bottom-line evaluators—course instructors. The international student community played a big role in some Chinese EAL graduate students’ practices of understanding and meeting writing expectations. Jinmei also mentioned that she valued peers’ input when she was not satisfied with the feedback or grade from her professors:
When I don’t agree with their comment, I will ask a third student, and generally it is an international student, or sometimes maybe American peers. When I said I don’t understand, I don’t mean it is not fair, maybe just because I cannot figure out the exact meaning of the feedback. Or maybe I don’t understand how I can improve with their feedback I may just ask for other’s understanding so I can resolve the instructors’ feedback fully. (Jinmei, second interview)

For her, peers’ input was a very important way of getting clarification or fully understanding writing expectations. Some students, including Wanlin, Qin and Rui also highlighted international student peers’ support in stress relief. For example, Rui referred to his friends as one “reliable source” to improve his writing by saying “once I had a roommate we took one class and we wrote the report together. He wrote one and I wrote one, so I can refer to how he does just maybe better my writing next time” (Rui, first interview). Their responses indicated that they used their social connectedness with peers to build a network to improve their writing.

Other student participants also revealed that peers in their international student community, especially those from China, could relate to each other’s experience since they were all from cultures with writing conventions different from those of the United States. Jinmei felt a sense of belonging to the international student community and would communicate her struggles in writing with other international EAL students. Likewise, Qin revealed that she felt more emotional support when there were other international students in her class, saying, “when I looked around and I saw nobody was with me I got a little nervous because I generally have my people [international students] with me” (Qin, second interview). This finding is consistent with Che’s (2013) finding that peer support provides “a much-needed emotional outlet for EAL students, simultaneously building and maintaining peer relationships in their
writing process” (p. 232). This is also consistent with some previous findings that people prefer friends who are like themselves along multiple dimensions (Hallinan & Williams, 1989). Peers can be important mediators in EAL international students’ writing practices.

A further analysis of these participants’ narratives points to the significance of peers in Chinese EAL graduate students’ writing practices, and consequently, how ESOL students capitalized on social networks of peers to facilitate their writing development. Mainly due to the same linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the most frequent type of support Chinese students got was from their friends from China. Accessing and utilizing a peer network established based on the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds thus became one of the most salient themes in my interviews with student participants. It is clearly indicated in their responses that student participants had their own networks to seek suggestions and to get help to understand the expectations.

Student interviewees touched upon the notion of friendship-based peer support. The superordinate theme of Chinese peers as one major source of support was largely derived from student interviews. It was clear that participants were negotiating their writing practices with their Chinese peers. When asked about the reason why they seek help from Chinese students, both Xinqin and Rui mentioned that it is “easier to communicate” (Xinqin, first interview).

In Xinqin’s program, about half of the graduate students are Chinese and half are American, with only a couple of students from other countries. She would ask Chinese peers to help her with cover letter and other professional writing because “actually I think they are better at it than American students” in terms of structure of writing and offering personal tips of how to organize a resume. Rui said that in course papers he
would “just collaborate with Chinese students…. Because we can communicate. But usually we take classes together” (Rui, first interview, 07/10/2014). Clearly, shared linguistic background explains partly why some students would not step out of their comfort zone and collaborate with students from other cultures or language backgrounds.

In the same vein, Wanlin mentioned that she sought help from a “very close friend” in the United States who writes in “authentic English.” This Chinese friend was able to give her very critical feedback and criticized her English writing for being “too long and not clear” (Wanlin, first interview). Along the same lines, other students resorted to Chinese peers whom they worked closely with. For example one student mentioned: “I actually want to mention the help I got personally from Hong [Pseudonym, a Chinese doctoral student in her program]. Because she is able to give me very big picture” (Jinmei, first interview). Embedded in her response was that she sought help from Chinese peers not only because they were able to communicate smoothly as some other participants mentioned, but also because this peer was able to offer constructive suggestions and help her demystify academic writing in her current program. This finding partly problematized Carlson and Nelson’s (1996) concern that the possibility of cultural respect for authority looming as a potential barrier for EAL students to engage in effective peer support in their writing. Almost all student participants highly valued feedback from their peers or friends. They did not show any concerns that peers were not authoritative figures. Instead, they spoke highly of their peers’ expertise and knowledge of academic writing. For example, Jinmei mentioned that her Chines peers helped her demystify writing process and have a comprehensive understanding of writing because they understood her situations. She used the connections and networks within Chinese students, or her social capital (Bourdieu,
1991), to navigate writing expectations. Along the same lines, Xinqin thought that her Chinese peers had some highly valued cultural capital in her program – strong mathematical foundation. Contrary to findings claiming that peers can hinder EAL students’ writing development, my study showed that Chinese EAL graduate students benefited from their peers’ guidance by mobilizing the social and cultural capital that they have available in their programs.

Some student participants further revealed that in peer support, reciprocity and information exchange were involved in these mutual scaffolding processes (Che, 2013). The following quotes are illustrative of how participants perceived peer support as a reciprocal process:

I wrote section one now I am going to review section two. Other people do it in a similar way. So everybody gives feedback so that is the first level. In another level, we kind of self-improved each other’s writing. (Kun, second interview)

I think when we write something together we just help each other…. Like once I had a roommate we took one class and we wrote the report together. He wrote one and I wrote one, so I can refer to how he does just maybe better my writing next time. (Rui, first interview).

Actually my friends sometimes we do homework together. For example, at my home or in the library when we write the report, we will talk together, like how you organize your paper, what do you write first, for this part what you will write and describe, and if I have an idea that I can’t express in English correctly, I would ask for help. (Jianhua, first interview)

Their experiences suggested that in peer support, they promoted reciprocity and information exchange. Their peer interaction extended from daily activities, such as
doing homework together, to informal peer support in writing that was featured by mutual scaffolding and reciprocity of writing support.

**Professor Feedback: “Only If He Could Just Give Us More Details.”**

The main purpose of this dissertation study was to understand how Chinese EAL graduate students experience writing expectations, and how they use resources and strategies to navigate writing expectations in “mainstream” curriculum requirements. Part of my second interview was designed to coincide with participants’ writing experience at the beginning of their programs to capture the sensation of being “thrown” into a new academic culture and navigating writing expectations from their gatekeepers—faculty. One particularly salient finding of this study was that participants were seeking qualitative and constructive feedback from their professors—the authority figures. Almost all participants expressed their satisfaction with the grades and comments they received in their writing assignments. Some expressed their concerns that qualitative and constructive feedback was missing and were eager to get “detailed,” individualized and constructive feedback.

They relied heavily on professor’s feedback, especially written feedback, to understand the writing expectations. As the “neophytes” in the academy who must learn to follow the rules (Harwood & Hadley, 2004), students in my study were eager to get constructive and individualized feedback from faculty. However, different professors tend to have different styles of giving feedback, which made it harder for EAL graduate students to unpack writing expectations. Jinmei expressed her confusion about different feedback styles:

Some of them will send the same standards in spite of the students’ nationality. Some of them may more tolerant. As I said they always give you positive feedback instead of negative feedback, and some of them just gave you much
more assignment much more work, they give you the feedback very timely, some of them are very lazy. To me they just treat the assignment as their task or their job (Jinmei, second interview).

When asked about his perception of professors’ feedback, Rui recounted his experience in a group project. He shared the writing text with the professor’s feedback with me. He explained that his professor offered some feedback in terms of his language use, but it would be helpful “only if she could just give us some more details” (Rui, first interview). He further explained that “I wanted her to say maybe like what sentence what part you don’t understand so we could examine over….She just commented that you need to work on your language, your writing language” (Rui, first interview). Likewise, Jinmei also expressed her preference for more detailed feedback, saying, “I prefer any feedback with detailed explanation why it is good why it is not good. I am I just hate some vague feedback for example fascinating. I don’t know what is fascinating why. It is not clear” (Jinmei, first interview). While this is true for most writers, my participants highlighted that their experiences in China involved lots of hands on support from faculty through the writing process even though there was less freedom in writing. Chinese students experienced more freedom but less support in the United States. Students expectations of faculty feedback were shaped by their previous writing experience in China, thus this is another major form of academic culture shock for them.

To help me understand what he meant by more detailed feedback, Rui showed me another writing sample with a professor’s feedback. There was no comment through the whole report. At the end, the professor gave two paragraphs of feedback, with the first paragraph saying that Rui did “a good job” in the introduction and “explaining your results.” Then the second paragraph the professor said that the “report was well-
organized though some improvement in writing needed, as I had trouble understanding some parts” (Rui’s document). As an EAL learner myself, I could not understand what the professor specifically meant by “some improvement in writing” and what parts that she had trouble understanding, given that no feedback was offered in the whole paper except the comment at the end. Rui expressed the same concern that he was lost when he received the feedback.

Jinmei associated “timely and constructive feedback” to good feedback, and further explained her expectations of her own writing and of professors’ feedback. She pointed out that if professors could understand and identify her weakness, they were giving her constructive feedback, saying:

I know where my of course I know roughly where my problem is. So if the teacher can point it out right my weakness, I just think that teacher understand my situation. And then what she offers or provides maybe more suggestive or constructive. Because for me when I say being constructive or being helpful, I think the precondition is that he or she understands where your weakness is. And the pre-condition of her or his understanding is he or she may read your writing seriously. But I think I have met an instructor who just gave you some suggestion at the very end of the semester. To me first the feedback is not timely because I think I need very timely feedback so I can correct my mistakes in time. So when you just gave me the feedback when the semester is over, I don’t even remember what I wrote, why I wrote it, why I constructed that idea at that time. Even if you gave me the constructive feedback to me it doesn’t make great sense. It makes sense but doesn’t make great sense. (Jinmei, second interview)

In the above passage, Jinmei explained the inseparable connection between “understanding my situation” and “constructive” feedback. The eagerness to be
understood and corrected was evident in her narrative. This echoes McPharrel’s (2011) finding that Chinese students generally expect their professors to “offer frank comments on their shortcomings and needs for improvement” (p. 106) It is true that typically professors are not writing teachers, so students’ expectations were not seen as part of instructors’ responsibilities. Jianhua was the only student who distinguished feedback from writing professors from other professors, saying that professors that offered general feedback were not writing teachers.

In the same vein, Qin problematized feedback that gave only “encouragement,” “comforting words,” and “nice words,” and felt criticism was a better way to improve her writing. When asked about the most helpful and least helpful feedback from professors, Jinmei also showed concern about only receiving comforting feedback because nice words “can just make you feel a little relaxed but it doesn’t help you with your writing skills” (Jinmei, second interview).

I further asked her what she meant by “constructive” and “suggestive” feedback, and she gave me an example of good feedback. The following except showed what feedback count as constructive to her:

To me still just I think I liked the feedback from Dr. Green [Pseudonym]. Because he always gives me very helpful very patient feedback and very constructive. At that time I remember my biggest problem was first there was a great gap between me and the reader, I just assumed too much. I assumed my readers know what I was talking about but the readers actually don’t. For example the instructor would ask what do you mean by this what do you mean by that I couldn’t figure out what you refer by this this. (Jinmei, second interview)
Her story revealed that the professor’s constructive and detailed feedback could help EAL students from a different writing convention fully understand reader-responsive writing by taking into consideration the knowledge of readers. As explored earlier in this chapter, a common thread emerging from my student interviews is that most Chinese EAL graduate students were not trained to write with readers in mind; however, in graduate school, they have to shoulder the responsibility of making their writing understandable to readers without help from their instructors.

For some other students who were assigned to work closely with their professors or advisors, constructive mentoring lead to satisfactory writing experiences and resulted in opportunities to publish in top-tier journals. Kun, a fifth-year student in computer sciences, worked closely with his advisor and received mentoring in writing. He had published three articles in peer-reviewed journals, and he spoke highly of his advisor’s mentoring in his writing:

My advisor first taught me what to write, what to include in my writing, then how to write. Some writing needs detailed sentences, detailed analysis, and some just need a summary. And also when we let us to write never help us to generate sentence in the first draft. So we always give him the first draft then he edit on that. I guess that’s three steps. What to write, how to write, then gives us very detailed feedback on the sentence, words, punctuation…. So the value of this time-consuming process is that at the beginning you spend a lot of time, but the second time you pay less effort and time, and you get improved. A the end of the story you just tell them to write something, and the second day they give you something and you look and you say this paragraph should be in front of that one. All done. (Kun, second interview)
It was clear that the purposeful training and scaffolding at an early stage of his program helped him understand writing expectations, thus obtaining the strategies to navigate those expectations. However, while students who lacked constructive training from advisors, such as Xinqin, felt less confident in their writing and did not value writing that much because her advisor was never “not interested in training me writing but research.”

Students’ responses to my questions about the most and least helpful feedback from their professors pointed to two facts: first, Chinese EAL graduate students in my study used professor feedback as one major means to understand academic writing expectations; second, many of them showed concerns about the lack of constructive feedback from faculty. To further understand what faculty members prioritized in giving feedback to students’ writing, I asked them what feedback they felt they should give. Wang and Rebecca said in their programs, they generally emphasize “technical stuff more than writing” and “sometimes feel a little bit uncomfortable correcting them and discouraging them” (Rebecca, focus group). On the contrary, Martina said that she would give “holistic feedback instead of focusing on grammar” and she would only give feedback on patterns of grammar mistakes in students’ paper. In this way, her students could “understand why they did not achieve what is required in the rubrics. Like how did you not synthesize, how did you not support your argument.” (Martina, focus group)

Most students in this study expressed that they preferred “detailed explanation” and “constructive feedback” to “nice words” because as novice academic writers, they were not familiar with the expectations. However, faculty members’ responses revealed that they generally focused on technical stuff and were not necessarily comfortable “correcting” students writing. The mismatch between students’
expectations of writing feedback and faculty members’ intention of giving feedback could cause dissatisfaction on students’ side, as shown in students’ comments of some faculty being “lazy.” Their responses indicated the significance of more communication and mutual understanding between Chinese EAL graduate students and faculty.

**Institutional support.**

In this section I report findings related to institutional support and explore why Chinese EAL graduate students in my study refused to go to institutional support such as school-sponsored writing centers. Even though there are many institutional supports available, students are still eager for some structural and concrete support from their mentors/advisors, instead of going to institutional workshops. The reasons for their reluctance to use institutional help included that the help was not specialized in their area; and that the format of writing workshops were not accommodating to Chinese students’ learning style because they were discussion-based instead of lecture-based.

Kun, a doctoral student in computer sciences, mentioned that although he thought the writing programs offered at his institution could be helpful:

> I don’t think the writing program is specialized…. Well they teach general rules of writing but in my field how do I say it is still not straightforward enough the most important the fastest way of learning is that they teach you something you can immediately use. But in those programs I guess they are teaching some general rules of writing, some can be used in writing essays some can be used in writing emails, they are not really helpful in writing technical papers. (Kun, second interview)
These ideas were echoed by Rui who mentioned that “yes maybe they can set up writing center according to different majors, maybe for example, majors that require a lot of writing they can separately set up a writing center specifically for that major” (second interview). Kun and Rui’s responses clearly indicated that graduate students, especially EAL graduate students, were eager to have discipline-specific writing centers to support them in their academic fields instead of getting “general” writing instructions. Their writing contained technical papers that were discipline specific, and they had time constraints in writing so they probably would not benefit from typical “general” writing support services.

Some students also mentioned that the writing workshops offered at their current institution were not tailored for Chinese students and the format of workshops was outside their comfort zone. As mentioned by Xinqin:

I just didn’t feel comfortable with the Americanized workshops. I don’t think I can benefit that much from the student discussion. So usually the workshop there is no instructor, just some students sitting together and discussing their own experience. I don’t think I would learn that much from the discussion. I prefer somebody the Chinese style that there is an instructor who will show us ok 1, 2, 3, 4 these are the tips of writing. But there are not the forms of workshops I guess. (Xinqin, second interview)

The way writing workshops were taught writing seemed to be a significant reason why Xinqin and her Chinese peers resisted these supports. Embedded in Kun, Rui, and Xinqin’s recounting was the preference for more student-friendly institutional support. As they suggested, a writing center that can serve students’ needs in writing in their own disciples would help them navigating writing in the United States.
Additionally, it is indicated that writing workshops should be offered based on students’ needs and preferred style, especially for students from different educational systems. As indicated by some participants in my study, many Chinese EAL graduate students felt uncomfortable attending writing workshops in typical American style that was contradictory to the typical lecture-based workshops in China. Hence they felt they could not “benefit” from attending writing workshops. Institutions might consider offer student-friendly writing support to Chinese EAL graduate students that fit their learning styles and specific requirements in their disciplines. However, many Chinese EAL graduate students felt their institution was using one-size-fit-all writing support to all students regardless of their educational backgrounds and learning styles.

**Conclusion**

For many student interviewees in my study, academic writing at graduate school in the United States was a mystery. They felt unprepared and were not sure what the expectations were and what resources and supports were available to them. In conclusion, they felt a strong mismatch between what they had learned about writing in China and what was expected here in the United States. To demystify academic writing and unpack the expectations, they sought help from international student peers, mainly those from China, as they were concerned about constructive and suggestive feedback from their instructors, and they preferred student-friendly institutional writing support that fit Chinese EAL graduate students’ learning styles and academic needs in their specific disciplines.

Findings in this dissertation study highlighted the new mysteries Chinese graduate students had to navigate to meet academic writing expectations in U.S. graduate schools and the significance of interactions in their writing practices settings, as well as the strategic ways Chinese graduate students responded to the academic
culture shock in writing and the specific tasks they had to face. The findings of this study add dimension to the understanding of international EAL students’ writing practices in that it studied Chinese EAL graduate students’ writing experience from their perspectives and amplified students’ voices, and further develop the research basis of the internationalization and diversification of U. S. higher education and EAL writing. Additionally this study has implications for future research on international EAL students’ writing, institutional responses to the growing international student body, and curricular and pedagogical approaches.

In the next chapter, I share conclusions drawn from these three major findings and discuss study implications for helping Chinese EAL graduate students to understand academic writing expectations that are different in their home country and for pushing higher educational institutions to understand the unique writing needs and demands of Chinese EAL graduate students.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusions

The increasing presence of Chinese EAL graduate students in the United States and their daunting obstacles in meeting academic writing expectations require that scholars purposefully work to understand their experience of academic writing. To better facilitate the learning experiences of Chinese graduate students in the United States, it is necessary for educators and higher educational institutions to understand the unique demands of Chinese graduate students in relation to their academic writing, especially how they make sense of and navigate academic writing expectations.

In the previous chapter, I have presented the three major themes that emerged from my multiple data sources. In this final chapter, I share conclusions drawn from major findings in this study and interpretations of the narrative profiles of participants. Specifically, I summarize the major findings and discuss study implications for helping students to understand academic writing expectations that are different in their home country and for pushing higher educational institutions to understand the unique writing needs and demands of Chinese EAL graduate students. I point out the potential limitations of this study and suggest future research directions.

Discussions

Graduate-level academic writing is a complex topic with multiple layers of social, cultural, and linguistic elements. As mentioned in the literature review chapter, although the existing studies provide profound insights into Chinese graduate students’ experience of academic writing, these studies generally have failed to address the specific needs and demands of Chinese EAL graduate students in their writing practices.

Looking across the research questions I proposed, I have seen unique patterns in how Chinese graduate students navigated academic writing expectations in the United
States and how they used various resources and strategies to meet these expectations. The major themes from multiple data sources revealed three major findings.

The first finding relates to their experience of navigating new “academic culture shock” (Gilbert, 2000), including thinking, freedom, and sharing personal feelings in writing. This finding expands on the existing literature on EAL students’ writing by including “independent and critical thinking” in their whole writing process instead of only focusing on their writing products, academic “freedom” in their writing practices, and their experiences of sharing personal feelings in writing, which is not common in Chinese academic culture. It also shows that for Chinese EAL graduate students, meeting academic writing expectations is not only writing linguistic symbols and convey ideas in linguistically correct language, but also the ability to do so in a culturally appropriate manner in particular social contexts (Currie & Cray, 2004).

The second finding transcends the linguistic and language models of academic writing and points to Chinese EAL students’ experiences of navigating social relations in their writing process. This finding contributes to EAL writing research on viewing writing as a social practice (Lave & Wegner, 1991) and social and cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1991) as theoretical lenses to understand EAL writing. Specifically this study revealed that although Chinese EAL graduate students in the STEM and medical fields were not advantaged in English language proficiency, they mobilized their unique cultural capital and linguistic capital to navigate writing expectations, such as strong programming and coding skills that they gained from the strict test-oriented educational system in China. Also Chinese EAL graduate students mobilized their social capital by making use of their Chinese students networks and connections. Additionally, it brings EAL writing research, especially research on international EAL
students’ writing, out of the linguistic model, such as contrastive rhetoric, to the social model and explores EAL international students’ writing experiences as related to their experiences of navigating social relationships in writing and academic socialization. This finding also presents the intersection of social relationships, EAL writing, and the psychological and emotional well being of international students, hence pointing to their unique needs and demands in navigating academic writing expectations.

The third finding is about how Chinese EAL graduate students used peer support, professor feedback, and institutional support, the three major resources they have access to, and how these resources affected their writing strategies. This corroborates the existing literature about students’ strategies and resources in their writing practices, mainly peer support, faculty feedback, and institutional support, while laying out Chinese EAL graduate students’ perception and evaluation of various supports available to them. In addition, this study found evidence of academic, social, and emotional influences of their academic experience on their perception and ways of navigating writing expectations. This finding adds to the EAL writing literature by exploring what Chinese EAL graduate students perceived as constructive writing feedback and international student-friendly writing support. Specifically, Chinese students generally expect their professors to understand and point out their weakness in writing. Their responses indicated that they expected constructive and harsh feedback from their instructors instead of just “nice words” which they got a lot at graduate school. This finding also questions the traditional one-size-fit-all writing support to all students regardless of their educational backgrounds and learning styles, and calls for higher institutions to take into consideration Chinese EAL graduate students’ unique backgrounds into consideration when offering writing support.
Conclusions

One major conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that there are various “academic culture shocks” that Chinese graduate students have encountered in the United States, including the new expectation of thinking independently and critically in writing practices, the high level of autonomy at multiple levels of writing process, and the expectation of sharing personal feelings and thoughts. Chinese graduate students had to conceptualize and negotiate academic culture shock to transition into graduate study and further succeed in writing.

I began this study with an understanding that there are some new academic writing expectations that Chinese EAL graduate students have to face in their U.S. programs, and they possibly have to overcome some social and cultural differences to navigate and further meet these new expectations. I found that my analysis of individual interviews with eight student participants, focus group interview with three faculty members and document review all pointed to three major academic culture shocks my participants had to deal with: critical and independent thinking – a highly debated notion in EAL writing-- freedom, and sharing personal feelings. These three “academic culture shocks” are intertwined. My analyses show that the priority on particular types of thinking in writing, critical and independent thinking in my study, gave students more autonomy in many ways instead of following “format,” “successful models,” and “safe ways” or writing only to cater to graders’ or teachers’ preferences. In return, the relatively high level of autonomy enhanced students’ opportunities to deeply explore their topics of choice and integrate their own independent and critical thinking in the writing process, as well as share personal feelings and thoughts in their writing. As shown through my analysis in this study,
Chinese EAL graduate students in this study learned that the cultural capital that was highly valued in Chinese academic culture did not match the expectations in their graduate programs. EAL graduate students were gradually socialized into more recognized central and fuller participation in the social practices of their communities in terms of handling “academic culture shocks”.

Although students in my study spoke highly of the new academic writing expectations, their experience navigating them was not without pain and struggle. Many students’ narratives of “academic culture shock” in writing and their coping strategies proved to be different from the existing literature. Specifically Chinese EAL graduate students in my study felt being critical and independent in thinking and writing was not emphasized in their previous English training, and they generally had to follow format in writing instead of having as much freedom as they had in the United States. Additionally they were not expected to share personal feeling in academic writing. This study, by amplifying Chinese EAL graduate students’ voices and unpacking their experiences of navigating writing experiences, problematizes some literature that essentializes the Asian culture as the Other (e.g. Kubota, 1999). My study has suggested that Chinese graduate students changed from limited to fuller participation in social practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991) involving their academic writing expectations in a U.S. higher educational context. When they were exposed to new writing expectations or “academic culture shocks” over the course of their academic study, they transformed from novice writers with little understanding of what the writing expectations were to more comfortable participants in their writing discourse communities. For instance, as most students noted in their interviews, they had “a hard start.” As they engaged more in writing, they began to think more independently and critically, picture their audience, navigate group writing
navigates writing expectations with faculty members. Their growth from novice writers to more experienced members of their discourse community was evident. Additionally, through navigating these new academic culture shocks and social relationships, they have familiarized themselves with the conventions of academic writing in the new context. For example, in terms of sharing personal feelings, some students were able to transition from “panic” to writing a text that their professors will appreciate without “crossing personal lines” by “overexposing feelings” to their audience. In the discussion of this thematic thread, I argue that participants’ changing views about academic culture shocks in writing and new writing expectations demonstrated their fuller participation in their community of practice (be it engineering, education, or humanities). In other words, they were being socialized into more appropriate central participation in the social practices of their communities.

The second conclusion is that this study on the writing of Chinese EAL graduate students transcended the traditional writing research that is limited to linguistic and rhetorical issues; instead, it expanded and explored further toward understanding Chinese EAL international students’ writing as a social construct in their graduate programs. While it is true that Chinese EAL students are facing linguistic challenges in writing, this study clearly suggests that their experience navigating social relations warrants more research because it involves unwritten rules that professors might take for granted. Additionally, students’ lack of understanding of unwritten rules can result in confusion navigating writing expectations. As explored in my findings chapter, one major issue the students could not afford to avoid was the social relations embedded in their writing practices, and how to successfully negotiate these relations without violating their traditions of social interaction. This group of
students expressed strong concerns about meeting the expectations of “real, imagined and imaginary audiences” in their writing; they were also concerned about violating the hidden conventions in negotiating and navigating writing expectations. For instance, most students were uncertain if they were being “polite” to their professors and peers. They also generally found it challenging to solve group conflicts in collaborative writing with people from multicultural backgrounds. As argued by Loi and Evans (2010), strongly criticizing the work of peers can be construed as causing embarrassment and bringing shame upon the person being criticized. The pressure to write in a foreign language with foreign writing conventions, coupled with the lack of understanding of the social relationship rules made Chinese EAL students in my study suffer from feelings of being “disadvantaged” and “frustrated.” Carson and Nelson (1996) also found that Chinese students tended to reflect their perception of their own vulnerability within group activities because of their background as EAL users and their reluctance to argue with peers. Hence, more attention and support should be offered to this group of students to help them navigate group dynamics in writing.

Some previous studies have documented how social interaction can affect the quality of a person’s learning. For example, Ens, Boyd, Matczuk and Nickerson (2011) claim “capitalizing on the dialogic nature of language, engagement with others in the process of writing creates intentional opportunities for developing relationships and generating knowledge” (p. 64). Additionally, there has been increased research into the “processes, emotions, complexities, nuances, values, cultural templates, embodiment, and the political and social contexts of teaching” (Pithouse, Mitchell & Weber, 2009, p. 44). Participants in my study have revealed they were not prepared to navigate social relationships with people in their writing process. While writing always involves social relationships, Chinese EAL graduate students experience social
relationship in unique ways as revealed in both my student and faculty participants’ responses. Specifically, Chinese EAL graduate students were learning to picture their “real, imagined and imaginary” audience and exploring the “polite” ways to communicate with faculty and peers, especially in email communication, as well as navigating conflicts in group writing projects with peers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This corroborates Fujioka’s (2014) argument that in graduate level-EAL writing studies, the notion of writing has been expanded beyond consideration of texts to that of writing as practice. My student participants’ narratives have documented their changes of engagement in particular social practices in their writing in terms of their awareness of picturing audience, ways of addressing academic cultural shocks, such as sharing personal feelings, and addressing group conflicts.

As discussed in Chapter four, Chinese EAL graduate students in my study had to navigate relationships in group writing in terms of negotiating roles of individuals, task distribution, and solving conflicts. This conclusion also is closely connected to Ritchie and Rigano’s (2007) study about the intricacies of negotiating roles and process and the comfort that developed between writers through their ongoing interaction. Additionally, Ens, Boyd, Matczuk and Nickerson (2011) pointed out the importance of linking individual contribution and feeling to intellect, and to consider the personal within the social context. My study findings expands previous findings in that they not only revealed the significance of understanding individual EAL graduate students’ writing within the social context, they also explored the unique ways Chinese EAL graduate students understand and negotiate these social relationships in writing. This study also problematized the traditional image of Asian EAL students as silent and passive participants in their writing communities. Specifically, some
students in my study were eager to offer critical feedback to group writing and did not shy away from group conflicts.

In their narratives, most Chinese students initially focused on differences in language and rhetorical issues, but their responses to my probing questions revealed their strong confusion about the social elements involved in writing, and that they had to navigate the multilayered social relations to further negotiate academic writing expectations. Considering how social relations inform and shape Chinese EAL graduate students’ writing, I argue that deeper and critical conceptual understandings of audience, “politeness,” and solving conflicts in-group writing are key for the development of students’ writing.

The third conclusion is this study reflects a much broader conversation about tensions and disconnections between resources and support available in higher educational institution and the unique needs of Chinese EAL graduate students that are different from mainstream native English-speaking writers. Although Chinese EAL graduate students in my study were able to use various resources and strategies in their writing, they generally found the feedback from professors and institutional support not international student-friendly. Only offering support to Chinese EAL graduate students based on the demands of mainstream students from the United States falls well short in addressing their unique demands and needs. For example, although their institution offered writing consulting services at the college Writing Center and various writing workshops for students, students were reluctant to use them because the format and content generally did not address their unique needs in writing. Specifically, the workshops offered were typically in the format of discussion. However, many new Chinese EAL international students were not familiar
with discussion-focused format, and they were more comfortable with a lecturing model. This finding is consistent with Ferris, Brown, Liu and Stine (2011), who argue that many instructors teaching EAL students writing “felt strongly that students’ language backgrounds were irrelevant” (p. 219), and they did not have “any substantive formal training in working with L2 writers” (p. 223). Considering how concepts with writing expectations inform Chinese EAL graduate students’ writing practices, I argue that deeper and critical conceptual understandings are crucial for the development of more student-friendly support. This calls for mutual understanding between institutions and students to build an international student-friendly support model, such as some transitional writing workshops for new Chinese EAL graduate students that help address the academic culture shock they experience.

Language and culture mediated the ways in which Chinese EAL graduate students interacted with their peers in academic writing practices. My participants also showed a preference for peers as the major source of support, especially those from China. This is consistent with the findings of Che’s (2013) study, and offers insights into how common language and culture could be productively used to facilitate writing practices and how bilingual and bicultural literacies affected writing processes. All student interviews in my study spoke Mandarin and English, and they had knowledge of both American and Chinese cultures. Their bilingual and bicultural literacies served as their cultural and social capital in negotiating interactions and exploring writing strategies in writing. Hence this study adds to the dimension of using bilateral and bicultural literacy to explore EAL students’ experience in the United States. As discussed in Chapter four, most student participants in my study sought help from their peers from China or other international peers because they understand each other culturally or linguistically. Also faculty focus group interview
revealed that students in my study felt more comfortable communicating writing expectations with professor from China. Che (2013) further argues that students’ common language and culture combined to form the social capital that they were able to mobilize. As revealed by student and faculty participants in my study, many Chinese EAL graduate students used their social and cultural capitals available to understand “academic culture shocks”, to negotiate social relationships in writing, and to get writing support from peers. The bilingual background and shared language and culture formed a supportive social network to help them demystify new writing expectations and to obtain help from both peers and Chinese faculty.

This section provides insights into how Chinese EAL graduate students are navigating new academic writing expectations, interacting with people in their community and creating their unique strategies, values, and multiple pathways to engagement in writing practices in U.S. graduate schools. In conclusion, my analyses have suggested many differences between my student participants’ previous experiences in China and the new expectations in the United States. They have also highlighted the mismatch in writing expectations between two academic cultures in many ways, as well as the lack of adequate preparation and international student-friendly support to EAL graduate students. However, this study does not aim at drawing a pessimistic picture or criticizing higher educational institutions or depicting Chinese EAL graduate students as disadvantaged in academic writing in U.S. graduate programs. Instead, my hope in exploring this line of inquiry is to serve as a catalyst for higher educational institutions to reflect on how they perceive Chinese graduate students’ unique needs, exceeding the old perception of them as passive learners or overlooking their unique ways of navigating writing. Plus, it could help EAL learners develop the awareness that as novice learners in their writing practices, they can move
to the center through “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Chinese EAL graduate students’ experience in my study mirrors this kind of learning and development. As newcomers in their writing community, Chinese EAL graduate students in my study had limited participation and they often found themselves “clueless” and “having a hard start.” Through their engagements with various members of their community, including faculty, peers and journal reviewers, they became less novice writers and more full-fledged members, which is “an evolving form of membership” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53).

**Significance of the Study**

Given demographic trends revealing that Chinese EAL international students represent the largest and fastest growing student group in U.S. higher educational institutions (Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2010), it is worthwhile for universities and EAL writing researchers to direct their attention to the changing demands in these contexts and plan support accordingly. In the dissertation, I noted that this study had the potential to depart from previous research in several ways and in doing so could lead to significant contributions to the existing scholarly literature. Now that the study is completed, I want to return to the discussion of the significance of this study.

**Significance for Practices.**

This study is an attempt to move Chinese graduate students, their professors, and higher educational institutions closer to an understanding of how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations in the United States. This study can shed light on methods for using qualitative study design to gain a broad picture of the academic writing experience of Chinese graduate students, the ways
they negotiate writing expectations, and the process they utilize to meet writing expectations during the writing process.

This study is significant because it captured the lived experiences of Chinese graduate students in navigating academic writing expectation in their own voices. Broadly speaking, this study can contribute to a more nuanced understanding than most previous studies of how Chinese EAL graduate students understand and meet writing expectations. For example, the participants in this study suggested that practices, values, and norms around academic writing in the United States are “taken for granted” and thus point to under-examined processes in the lives of this group of students, and their unique needs. Consequently, it can promote attention to both Chinese graduate students’ needs in negotiating the unfamiliar demands of academic writing. For higher educational institutions, this study can inspire transformative work in offering academic writing support to Chinese and other international students and provide insight into what recruitment and retention strategies work for this population.

**Significance for Research.**

Unlike most of the existing studies, this study focused on faculty members’ and Chinese graduate students’ philosophy and practices, rather than only students or only faculty. It therefore adds to the previous academic writing expectation research by using both faculty members and students as primary informants and by considering their interactions and experiences. Its findings are thus applicable to L2 writing professionals and higher educational institutions, as well as those working in specialized L2 writing programs to put more efforts in understanding the nature of EAL students’ writing and help them navigating writing practices instead of focusing on traditional remedial strategies and writing pedagogy.

This study can also add to the growing body of qualitative literature exploring
EAL students’ academic experiences, providing a deep understanding of how they navigate these experiences and achieve academic success. Furthermore, this study can fill a void in research that attends to the needs of EAL students in the United States. Specifically, the notions of navigating academic freedom in writing and navigating social relations, as well as the notion of mobilizing their various kinds of social capital to build a social network to support them in their writing practices, are generally missing in the existing literature. Theoretically, it can enrich the literature that views writing as a social practice and uses social, cultural, and linguistic capitals to explore EAL graduate students’ academic writing. First, this study moves away from focusing on Chinese EAL graduate students’ writing products to understand their writing as a practice that is socially embedded, and reveals the unique experience of EAL students navigating social relationships. Second, it enriches the literature by using EAL graduate students’ cultural capital to understand the social aspect of writing. Specifically this study pointed out how cultural norms mediated the social interaction in Chinese EAL graduate students’ writing practices. Although the Chinese EAL graduate students in this study were aware of some disadvantages as EAL writers, they felt that they were legitimate members of their communities and they have other cultural and linguistic capitals that enabled them to understand and negotiate writing expectations. Consequently, supporting Chinese EAL graduate students with their writing should not stay at the pedagogical level. More efforts should be spent on understanding their unique experience in mediating academic freedom and navigating social relationships in writing, and how they use their unique social capital and cultural for legitimate membership in their disciplinary communities.

Implications
This research has the potential to inform practice and research in the field of international students’ education and EAL writing. I began my study by adopting the view of writing as a practice that is socially constructed (Lave & Wegner, 1991). I viewed Chinese EAL graduate students as emerging participants in writing practices in their communities of practice.

The findings of this study suggest that various causes limited these students’ ability and comfort levels in writing, and we need to address issues that are specific to Chinese EAL graduate students, including the need for more time and care on the part of the professors, the perception of “arguing” and “taking sides” in group writing and sharing personal feelings, and the lack of international student-friendly institutional supports that are suitable for L2 writers. These are the issues that need to be addressed not only at the institutional level but also “at the national level as institutions that have similar curricula work together to identify common goals and outcomes” (Matsuda, Saenkhum, & Accardi, 2013, p. 82).

This study has also produced a number of recommendations for addressing the needs of EAL international students in terms of their academic writing. In practice, focusing exclusively on EAL international students’ language proficiency and providing remedial courses are not enough for addressing the unique needs and demands of this student population. The traditional American-style writing center or workshop failed to take into consideration of the nuances and intricacies of EAL international students’ writing practices. To fully understand and support them in their writing, higher educational institutions need to help students unpack the elements of academic cultural shocks new international EAL students will likely encounter, understand social relations in their writing process, and support their writing in
specific social contexts. However, many higher educational institutions tend to narrow Chinese EAL students’ view of writing to only language-making the implications of the findings from this study all the more imperative. Additionally, I recommend that researchers and higher educational institutions develop and incorporate activities and assignments aimed at discerning how notions of writing expectations are delivered to students.

This study also shed light on research on international EAL students in general, Chinese EAL graduate students in particular, by adopting writing as a social practice and capital theories as theoretical lens. The three major findings presented in this study offer strong rationales to explore Chinese EAL graduate students’ experience from the theoretical lens of social practices and social capital.

Limitations and Areas for Further Research

The implications of such message for international students education and EAL writing in general, and Chinese EAL graduate students in particular, are far-reaching and complex, and this study can only touch on a few points. In this section I present the limitations of this study and point out areas for future research.

Because this was a qualitative research study with eight students and four faculty members, the issue of generalizability can also be cited as a limitation. My goal was not to understand all students but instead to gain insights from these students into some of the processes and challenges involved in their daily practice of writing. My findings lead to questions about how students are participants in their communities of practice, how they construct their identities when facing academic culture shocks, how they interact with dominant social constructs, and how they use their various capitals to support their writing. They also lead to questions about how we can reconceptualize
Chinese EAL graduate students as active participants in writing practices. My findings also lead to questions that help us problematize both writing practices and institutional policies, challenging us to create participation structures in writing that provide multiple pathways to success for this group of students. As a qualitative researcher, I embraced the richness and complexity of the experiences and perspectives of Chinese EAL graduate students in navigating writing expectations. However, I am also a Chinese Ph.D student, and I have been teaching academic writing courses and offering writing consulting in the United States for several years. This insider role may affect the way I interpret my participants’ experience. To minimize the influence of my insider role on the interpretation of data, I used member checking and shared the findings with my participants. However, my interpretations in this area are still limited and point to a possible area of development in future research.

The current study is a small-scale research project on how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations in the United States. The major limitation of this proposed study is that such an analysis may not be enough to address the complexities of Chinese graduate students’ experience of navigating academic writing expectations. Many factors may influence Chinese graduate students’ experience of navigating academic writing expectations, including gender and previous working experience. For example, there is an increasingly diversified Chinese EAL graduate student body in the United States. In my study Qin was educated in both China and Japan and spoke English as a third language. Another student Jinmei had more than ten years of teaching experience in China. Their different backgrounds definitely play a big role in their unique writing experience. In terms of sharing personal feelings and solving conflicts, almost all female students have expressed their struggle but none of the four male participants strongly showed...
their concerns. A better understanding of the interaction between EAL writing, gender, and navigating social relations was beyond the scope of this study, and should be explored further in future research. A deeper analysis in these areas could be important to EAL students, and more broadly, to the field of international student education research and EAL writing research. Additionally, similarities and discrepancies among and across Chinese student subgroups in navigating writing expectations in the United States are important to identify in order to inform faculty members’ pedagogy and institutional policies. Future research can further analyze and theorize how gender affects Chinese EAL graduate students’ writing experience. Specifically more research can focus on solving group writing conflicts and navigating freedom in their writing practices since almost all female student participants identified them as challenges. Subsequent research may also examine how the notion of the politeness shape the ways that Chinese EAL graduate students conceptualize writing practices.

As I have shown, while linguistic and rhetorical skills are heavily researched in the existing literature, very limited studies have touched upon how navigating social relations affect EAL graduate students’ practices of making sense of writing expectations and meeting them. Future research on EAL international student writing could explore deeply how they make sense of social relations involved in writing and how professional development sessions could be offered to faculty members to help them make informed decisions in teaching English writing or offering feedback to EAL international students. Possible future research topics include professional development sessions for faculty on how to offer constructive writing feedback to EAL students based on their unique needs and learning styles and how to organize effective group writing assignments. My study also suggests that Chinese EAL
graduate students came to their graduate programs with their “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2013). Future research can explore EAL international students’ academic experiences from the perspective of their funds of knowledge.
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Appendix One: Sample faculty focus group protocol

Study Title: Great Expectations: A Qualitative Study of How Chinese Graduate Students Navigate Academic Writing Expectations in U.S. Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Hairong Shang-Butler, Ph.D. candidate at Warner School of Education and Human Development

Co-Principal Investigator: Dr. Nancy Ares, Ph.D. Associate Professor at Warner School of Education and Human Development

The PI start saying “Hi everyone, I’m Hairong Shang-Butler, a PhD candidate at Warner School of Education. Thank you very much for your participation. This focus group interview is part of my dissertation study on how Chinese graduate students navigate academic writing expectations. It intends to open up a discussion on your general experience of advising/teaching Chinese graduate students, especially in their academic writing, and how they navigate writing expectations.

I’d like to remind you that participating in this research study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. I also want to make you aware that I will be audio recording this focus group interview”. All the information we share today will remain confidential. Let’s begin”.

Major questions:

Which department & program are you in? How long have you been teaching / advising Chinese graduate students?

Is there anything in particular about your experience teaching/advising Chinese graduate students in terms of their academic writing?

What does a typical day of your writing class look like, I mean, both your regular class session and your recitation session? I just want to get a rough idea.

What are your general impressions of Chinese graduate students’ academic writing?

What do you expect from your students writing? What does a typical good piece of academic writing look like to you?

How do you communicate writing expectations with your students in general? Do you think Chinese graduate students need extra help understanding your expectations? If so why?

What so you think are some specific challenges Chinese graduate students face in meeting academic writing expectations in the U.S? Any examples?
Appendix Two: Sample Individual Student Interview Protocol (1st round)

Study Title: Great Expectations: A Qualitative Study of How Chinese Graduate Students Navigate Academic Writing Expectations in U.S. Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Hairong Shang-Butler, Ph.D. candidate at Warner School of Education and Human Development

Co-Principal Investigator: Dr. Nancy Ares, Ph.D. Associate Professor at Warner School of Education and Human Development

Introduction:
The PI Hairong Shang-Butler introduces herself and says “I’d like to remind you that participating in this research study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. I also want to make you aware that I will be audio recording this interview.”

The PI previews interview protocol with the subject and asks him/her to choose a pseudonym (first and last names).

1. Confirm subject name, ask for age, current program, length of time studying in current program

2. I’m interested in Chinese graduate students experiences of navigating academic writing expectations at U.S. graduate schools. What have been your experiences?

3. What are the major academic writing genres in your program? What are the major processes of academic writing for you? Who is your audience?

4. What do you see as the major challenges in your academic writing? And why?

5. What previous experiences or training did you have with academic writing in your home country? How did you learn to write? For what purposes and audiences? (Other prompting questions include: What counted as success? What was “good writing” when you were learning writing? How does that compare to what counts as good writing in graduate school?)

6. What surprises about academic English writing in the U.S., if any, did you experience early in your college experience? What do you think are the biggest difference in writing in your own country and in the U.S.? What things did you have to learn about?
7. Were there particular expectations you felt you needed to meet? Did those expectations change during your graduate studies? How are these expectations different from or similar to those in your previous institution?

8. What writing support do you get generally in your program or institution? Did you get any social network support do you have in graduate school? If yes, how is it affecting your writing?

9. What was your experience interacting with your professors or instructors in terms of understanding and meeting writing expectations? What feedback did you get about your academic writing? Among all feedback you got from your instructors/professors, which ones were the most helpful and not helpful?

10. Who do you seek help from when you need writing assistance outside of your class?

11. What other comments do you have about your experience of navigating academic writing expectations?
Appendix Three: Individual Student Interview Protocol (2nd round)

Study Title: Great Expectations: A Qualitative Study of How Chinese Graduate Students Navigate Academic Writing Expectations in U.S. Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Hairong Shang-Butler, Ph.D. candidate at Warner School of Education and Human Development

Co-Principal Investigator: Dr. Nancy Ares, Ph.D. Associate Professor at Warner School of Education and Human Development

Introduction:
The PI Hairong Shang-Butler introduces herself and says “Thank you again for continuing to participate in this study. Based on our first interview, I have come up with more questions that I would like to ask you in terms of your experience navigating academic writing expectations in the U.S. I’d like to remind you that participating in this research study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. I also want to make you aware that I will be audio recording this interview.”

The PI previews interview protocol with the subject and asks him/her to choose a pseudonym (first and last names).

1. Confirm subject name

2. In our first interview, you have talked about your general writing experiences. In this interview, I am interested in your experience understanding and navigating writing expectations in your current program. What was your experience understanding writing expectations? Are you able to understand expectations in your writing? If yes, what are the specific expectations you need to meet? If not why?

3. How are expectations conveyed to you?

4. What kind of feedback have you got from your instructors or advisors? Based on the feedback, how would you describe your ability to meet the expectations?

5. Describe some challenges that you face in understanding and meeting writing expectations.

6. What strategies and resources do you use to navigate academic writing expectations.
7. What other comments do you have about your experience of navigating academic writing expectations?
Appendix Four
Student Information Letter

Title of Study: Great Expectations: A Qualitative Study of How Chinese Graduate Students Navigate Academic Writing Expectations in U.S. Higher Education

Principal Investigator (PI): Hairong Shang-Butler
Co-Investigator: Dr. Nancy Ares

This letter describes a research study conducted by the Principal Investigator (PI), Hairong Shang-Butler from the University of Rochester for the purpose of understanding the academic writing experiences of Chinese graduate students in U.S. graduate programs. Following completion of this research study, the PI will be able to gain understanding of the complexities of academic writing at graduate level and how Chinese graduate students navigating writing expectations.

This research study requires 10 student subjects to take part and will involve two 90-minute interviews conducted over two weeks. The interviews will contain some personal questions about your educational experience, and your academic writing practices, and your view on your writing experience in U.S. graduate programs. There is a possibility that some of these questions may make you feel uncomfortable to answer. Should this be the case you are not required to provide answers.

Please be aware the interviews will be audio taped for accuracy of data. Your responses will be kept in a confidential manner and only the investigators will have access to your individual answers. All audiotaped data will be destroyed once the transcribing process is complete. Only summarized data will be presented at meetings or in publications, and will not include your personal information.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and should you wish to do so for any reason you can withdraw at any time without consequences. To thank you for your time, you will receive a $20 gift card.

For more information, questions or participation about this research you may call Hairong Shang-Butler at (585) 752-2126 or email her at hshang@u.rochester.edu. If you have questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research subject you may contact, anonymously if you wish, a Human Subjects Protection Specialist at the University of Rochester Research Subjects Review Board, Box 315, 601 Elmwood Avenue, Rochester, NY 14642-8315, Telephone (585) 276-0005. For long-distance calls, please call, toll-free, 011-877-449-4441. You may also call these numbers if you cannot reach the research staff or wish to talk to someone else.