# THE INTERNATIONAL L2 POSTGRADUATE EXPERIENCE OF THE ACADEMIC ESSAY: A LEARNING JOURNEY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to an understanding of the journey made by postgraduate ESL students composing in an academic context. Findings from this qualitative research on composing, the learner, and their learning collectively could be seen as shifts in identity by the L2 writer for their current and future learning contexts.

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine if you will that you are a student who travels to a foreign university where teaching is in another language to begin coursework postgraduate study. From your undergraduate degree you possess certain skills, but what will apply, and more importantly, what will not, in this new context? Now you have *some* idea of the learning challenges that face international coursework postgraduate ESL (ICP-ESL) students who study, and write academically, in the Australian higher education context.

There are established theoretical accounts which enable us to understand the process of composing in a first language (L1). There are also accounts in the literature of the way in which academic writing is a special case; it usually involves composing using sources. The literature shows that first language and second language (ESL or L2) composers have different experiences. This is in some measure due to the L1 learner influences of language, culture, context, and their prior learning. Underlying these accounts of the composing process is, however, the question of motives, conceptions and approaches to learning. This paper presents specific findings from a Master of Higher Education thesis. The findings on composing (reading, writing and thinking) point to three distinct L2 composing processes that may also influence the level of structure within the essay. Findings on these L2 learners also show how their motives, perceptions, and intentions are closely associated with their conception of, and approach to, their learning. Although this paper specifically focuses on ICP-ESL students' experiences of their academic essay, the two platforms I suggest for scaffolding second language composing in English has the potential to be applied more widely to L2 (and other) lifelong learning contexts. Lifelong learning, in this paper, is defined as any formal or informal learning experience which contributes to an individual's education as an adult beyond formal schooling.

## Literature Review

Composing is an amalgam of writing, reading and thinking, and it "often requires incorporating material from source texts – statistics, ideas, quotations, paraphrases, and so forth – into written texts" (Hirvela, 2004, p. 1) This is to say, then, that researchers in the area of writing have used the term 'composing' to recognise that reading, writing and thinking interact, and re-interact, with each other in ways that are not always visible or separable in order to produce the final product, in this case the essay. Reading, writing and thinking can be represented as a mutually generative and recurring relationship within the composing process.

However, this process is also "about context; it pictures writers and readers as thinkers, problem solvers, meaning makers who are located within a social and rhetorical circle that influences them both" (Flower, 1993, p. 17). In other words, writers use composing as a learning tool to construct meaning within their social context. As well writers usually do not write in isolation, they are influenced by the society or rhetorical circle around them. For students, their rhetorical circle consists of the researchers and writers in their discipline, otherwise referred to as their disciplinary community. If the student changes their disciplinary community or context, then logically there may be changes in both the influences upon them and the way they compose as a result of those influences. Therefore, in order to understand the change in expectations of them as writers, L2 students may benefit from understanding their original individual writing context (L1 writer identity) and how it differs from their current situated writing context (L2 writer identity). At the heart of this, students go through a process of meaning-making within the disciplinary community, a process which involves the contested nature of knowledge, language and identity (Lea & Street, 2006).

Writing in a second language sits between composing and language learning. The literature on ESL writing or composing points to both similarities and differences between L1 writers and L2 writers. There are some similarities between basic inexperienced L1 writers and L2 writers. L2 writers have the ability to transfer L1 writing skills and strategies and operate in a similar way to expert English writers. However, the differences between L1 and L2 writers fall into a number of categories such as cognitive capacity, time to compose, lack of vocabulary, capacity to choose appropriate words, range of vocabulary, and cultural familiarity with the genre (Leki, 1992). A key area of concern is how L2 writers interact with the texts of others when composing from sources. Due to their prior learning and cultural experiences L2 writers may be unfamiliar with notions of western views of ownership of words and ideas (Pennycook, 1996); therefore plagiarism may not be recognised by the ESL composer as an offence against academic conventions (Pecorari, 2003). There is an argument for ESL writers using the strategy of explicitly differentiating between their voice (words and ideas) and the voices of others/experts (Ivanic, 1998).

Research points to inexperienced L2 writers undertaking a process of cobbling together, textual borrowing, or *patchwriting* as a way of integrating source materials from their discipline when composing (Howard, 1995). Pecorari (2003) agrees that Howard's model of *patchwriting* has merit as an initial learning phase for L2 writers; however it is important for L2 composers to progress past this, and make the transition to the development of their own voice or L2 writer identity. This is because paraphrasing and quoting are important as a learning process "in which reading and writing inevitably overlap and interact while the student locates and reconstructs or appropriates material from the source texts" (Hirvela, 2004, p. 94).

There is also a need to explore the underlying but influential connections between the student as a learner and their learning. In order to understand the learner, we need to understand the connections between motives, perceptions, intentions, conceptions, and approaches. For students, motives are underlying personal concerns that influence perceptions and create intentions. Motives generally fall into three areas: genuine interest in the subject; wanting to succeed or achieve; the dread of failure. Perceptions, on the other hand "result as much from the motives of students as from the actual learning situation, and these perceptions ultimately affected the approach students took."

(Schmeck, 1988, p. 324). All this plays a role in the approach to learning that the student takes in their current context.

Entwistle emphasises the importance of the motivation of the learner in the scheme of student learning. He draws on the difference between *intrinsic* motivation or "learning for personal understanding" and *extrinsic* motivation or "fulfilling the requirements of others" (1988, p. 22). Marton and Saljo (1997) take up this distinction and suggest that there are connections between intrinsic motivation and a deep approach to learning, and extrinsic motivation and a surface approach to learning. Put simply, how the student identifies as a learner, influences how he or she goes about learning.

So how do these connections relate to the way students write their academic essays? Smith, Campbell and Brooker (1999, p. 336) found through their case study analysis of essay writing processes that "students' conceptualisation of the task governs their approach at every stage of the essay construction procedure from identifying references to final editing". Further to this, Green's (2007) study of international students essay writing revealed links between these students' perceptions of learning, their perceptions of essay writing, and motives toward the task. In other words, how the learner views the task also influences their learning.

Hounsell (1997) identified three distinct conceptions of essay writing in L1 writers, and what is involved in the task within a discipline for history and psychology undergraduate students - *essay as argument* (information synthesised and integrated as evidence into a structured line of argument), *essay as viewpoint* (information representing a point of view), and *essay as arrangement* (collection of organised information). With *essay as argument* the students viewed the essay as a sum of integrated parts, constituting a line of argument which is supported by evidence. Although *essay as viewpoint* is also experienced as the integration of parts into a whole representing a point of view, it varies because the role of evidence in the argument is not seen as significant. *Essay as arrangement* differs again, in that it is a group of separate, if relevant, points collected into an organised product lacking a theme or position (Hounsell, 1997).

Looking at the preceding points, it can reasonably be said there are connections between composing (the way students read, write and think), the learner (and the influences of their prior L1 and current L2 learning context) and

their learning (conception of and approaches to learning). So it is important to take into account these influences collectively. However, there could be a complication for L2 students; the possibility of an inconsistent mix of these collective influences.

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research aims to identify and understand the students' experience. Consequently the approach for the framework and methodology of this research is based on an interpretive study of similarities and differences. The findings reported here are the students' accounts that emerged from the data. The primary data source was transcripts from semi-structured interviews with ten international coursework postgraduate ESL (ICP-ESL) students from Master's programs: Arts, Education and Business. These students were born outside Australia in countries where English is not their first language (China, Denmark, Germany, India, Indonesia, Iran, Korea, Lebanon, Sri-Lanka, Taiwan). The secondary data source consisted of two prior marked essays provided by each of the ICP-ESL students prior to the interview. The students were asked also to reflect on their past experience with academic essays, completed either as part of their current program, and/or during their undergraduate program. The questions were designed so that the interview began with broad open questions regarding the similarities and difference between their L1 and L2 experiences, and then focussed in on more essay-specific questions by the end of the interview. Probing questions were added for examining the students' interpretations of both the written essay and the assessor's written comments. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim to form the primary data.

Descriptions of students' experiences of academic writing (using pseudonyms) are the outcome of this inquiry. Data analysis involved immersing myself in the data by listening to, reading, and re-reading the transcripts in order to extrapolate themes. The identification and refinement of themes of similarities and differences were the result of repeated cycles of data analysis. The marked essays were used as a valuable tool for the interview. Pre-interview, I analysed the essays and the marker's comment in order to develop specific probing questions about argument, evidence, acknowledgement, structure, syntax, and the like.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this research were wide-ranging, and as such I will focus on the themes that are pivotal to lifelong learning. They are Composing Processes, Argument and Evidence, Referencing and Plagiarism and Learning Issues.

The findings on Composing Processes of ICP-ESL students vary. For some it is a recursive and generative process (*thinking through writing*), for others it is *thinking then writing*; with perhaps some recursiveness occurring during the pre-writing processes.

> *"I have usually been doing writing the body first, then I do the introduction and then the conclusion. When I start I usually do not know what the whole thing is going to be, and as I write I get ideas and then I have a think..."* [Steven]

> *"No, I'm not that kind of person to move around things. Once I have to write everything down, which is in memory, then after writing down everything, maybe I go again through it and I add some words or I take away.."* [Iris]

But for others again, their approach to the L2 composing process is based in deference to their lecturers (*thinking from the point of authority*). L1 cultural influences result in these L2 students seeing lecturers as incontestable figures of authority. This frames, then, all future thoughts, ideas and processes of the L2 composer.

L1 influences are also revealed in relation to the level of structure in students' L2 academic essays. Students who are inexperienced L1 composers seem to rely heavily on structures and frameworks supplied in their L2 context, because of either their lack of prior composing experience and/or their deference to authority:

> *"...according to what I learnt in China, it is like usually you will have five paragraphs for this, in the first paragraph you give your point of view about something and in the next three paragraphs, or maybe two paragraphs, you give two or three reasons to support point of view and in the last paragraph you make a conclusion of your point of view."* [Catherine]

However, students who have L1 composing experience seem to tap into these strategies and skills and transfer them to their L2 composing. Even so transference of L1 composing skills and strategies does not necessarily assure quality outcomes.

Those students who are associated with Hounsell's (1997) *Essay as argument* experience of essay-writing are able to recall in detail their academic argument, seem to fully understand how evidence supports and builds their line of argument, are intrinsically motivated towards

their essay, and seem to use the task as a tool for deep learning. These students seem to understand the connected importance of: critical analysis; reciprocal meaning between reader and writer; balance; objectivity; disciplinary community norms and practices; broad background disciplinary knowledge; and appropriate acknowledgement of the sources (referencing). The second group experiences essay-writing as a disparate collection of facts lacking any theme or argument, or *Essay as arrangement* (Hounsell, 1997). Interestingly, the only sense of organisation in their essay may be that supplied by their lecturer in the form of headings within the essay. This points to the complexity of underlying influences of *thinking from the point of authority*, wherein even 'relevance' gives way to 'what the lecturer says'.

The L2 composers who experienced their essay writing as *Essay as argument* (Hounsell, 1997), saw the connection between this, their voices (ideas and thoughts) and the voices of others (ideas and thoughts of researchers/experts). They acknowledged other sources as part of the logical line of argument, adding to the authority of their writing, indicating a level of background research, and valued by the disciplinary community.

> *"When I did undergraduate, it was okay don't plagiarise, just reword it. But now I cannot recite to it, like I can use the person's name and my work is better, because I don't have to ask if it's my work. Because it's someone else's work and I adopted it for my essay and I got it from expert." [Irene]*

However, those L2 composers associated with *Essay as arrangement*, have an underdeveloped conception of referencing, *patchwrite* their voice (ideas and thoughts) and voices of others without differentiating them.

The influences of connections between the learner and their learning are implicit but substantial. In the course of relating their motives and approaches towards learning to write the western academic essay many of the students also related their general views about studying in Australia. One could even suggest that their motives and approaches to essay writing are, to a certain extent, microcosms of their motives and approaches to their pursuit of postgraduate study more generally. If international L2 students appreciate that studying at a western university will be different, then they may also appreciate that there are different approaches to study (different levels of expectations; different disciplinary community norms and practices; etc.). It is this awareness of connections or links that influence approaches to learning that is important for *all* learners throughout their learning lifespan.

So how does this relate to students' motives and approaches to study and/or their academic essays? As outlined in the literature, intrinsic motivation is the personal connection or interest with the subject in order to find meaning, whereas extrinsic motivation is more what can be gained through the completing the task. Furthermore, there are links between intrinsic motivation (personal connection) and a deep (meaning-making) approach to learning, and extrinsic motivation (lack of connection) and a surface (reproductive) approach to learning.

> *"I want to know more. Yes, and of course I want to present more knowledge in my essay, that my lecturer could read it. But it's more for me, like I want to have that knowledge, so I can write that essay that gives me satisfaction." [Irene]*

Glenda, Iris and Irene (above quote) display deep approaches to learning and intrinsic motivation. They have interest in the learning task: they create a personal connection with the topic; they actively seek understanding, and they try to construct personal meaning. Of particular note is Irene's explicit awareness of the difference between her current postgraduate active/deep learning, and her undergraduate passive/surface learning. Lawrence, however, manifests a lack of interest in the learning task, and fails to understand the relevance of engaging in the task appropriately – a clear case of extrinsic motivation and a surface approach to learning.

> *"Yeah, I felt like that is too boring, I can't do this again. Yeh, I ask myself why I am doing this again, because it is boring and I don't have to do this." [Lawrence]*

Students' motives and approaches to studying overall seem closely connected to their motives and approaches towards the academic essay from the moment they decide upon their assignment topic through to the finished essay. The complicating factor here is an awareness of academic expectations: what is expected of an international student studying in Australia at a coursework postgraduate level, and what the international student understands is expected of them. This points to the need to make explicit to international L2 students the differences in: educational systems; universities; teaching styles; learning styles; academic standards. Therefore all aspects of university expectations should be made explicit, with an emphasis on representing this in basic functional English if possible. If the fundamental truth for international L2 students is that they are learning in a different context, then

they need to fully understand that new context. Furthermore, and this may be a crucial issue for all lifelong learning, each separate learning experience may require specific explicit context that is unique to that learning situation.

### Implications

From these findings I would suggest two platforms for scaffolding ICP-ESL students' second language composing that should help contribute to their success in future learning contexts. The first platform involves the development of the learners' meta-cognitive strategies through explicit identification of, and differentiation between, L1 and L2 writer identity; the identities that are shaped by the interplay between composing, the learner and their learning. The second platform involves developing within the L2 student the capacity to use the slightly formulaic process of *patchwriting with proof* by consciously positioning alongside experts, and claiming credibility by acknowledging those experts. In time this may help the L2 composer understand and construct their L2 writer identity. These platforms should also collectively address most of the hurdles faced by ICP-ESL composers which include lack of L1 composing experience, incompatible L1 composing strategies, gaps in L2 usage, limited range of English language, culturally limited learning approaches, and the brevity of coursework masters program.

Teaching L2 students about L2 composing is fraught with difficulty – a pulling-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps problem. It is important that we recognise that this difficultly does not start with composing, but is underpinned by the broader ways in which students perceive their new context. The way any learner at any stage of their learning life perceives their current context is the same pivotal issue for lifelong learning. Consequently, both academics and support staff (ESL advisers, learning advisers, information literacy librarians) should have access to dedicated support for a research component in their work in student diversity, in particular, second language student learning and ESL composing at coursework postgraduate level. For both academics and support staff, undertaking research on L2/ESL students may well be extremely valuable in a practical way.

### CONCLUSION

All of the students interviewed expressed a genuine frustration with the need to surmount the multiple challenges for their current L2 learning context in a short amount of time. These students feel that the western attitude towards ICP-ESL students can be one full of implicit expectations. These L2 students feel an underlying expectation that they can make their peace with academic English, ascertain the required standard of work and put together a composing process which will allow them to demonstrate that. There is an implied expectation that as learners ESL students are like us and their prior learning is similar to ours. There is also an expectation that ESL students can easily immerse themselves in western educational systems, universities, teaching styles, and learning styles. What is obvious, however, is that there are multiple, overlapping complexities that make up the ICP-ESL student's journey in negotiating their L2 learning context and in developing competence at producing an academic essay. The findings of this study point in the same direction as much of the research literature, namely, that there is a need for sustained help for these students from academics and support services. In turn, staff who work in these functions need to have access to informed training and development.

Academics, librarians and learning advisers need to work collaboratively in order to help ICP-ESL students' frame their futures within their L2 learning contexts and to manage academic writing with competence and confidence. Zamel (1998p. 193) reminds us that: "We need to recognise that…the entire academic community assumes the responsibility of teaching reading, writing, critical approaches." This study suggests that there are ways in which we can assume this responsibility that are likely to be successful and could also be of value, now and in the future, for *all* learners challenged by changes in their learning context. In particular, academics and support staff need to assist L2 (and non-L2 students) to come to a more conscious awareness of all of the differences in their new learning context/s. Further, academics and support staff need to induct ICP-ESL students into the quite micro-level strategies and conventions of composing in ways that are specific and enabling, helping them to close the loop between writing and learning. Only then will western educators begin to take into account all of the difficulties that have emerged in this study.

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