

## **L2 Students' Adaptive Transfer Beyond First-Year Writing**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Learning transfer with regard to academic literacy in higher education has drawn more and more researchers' attention in recent years (Baik & Greig, 2009). However, only a small number of transfer studies are pertinent to international and multilingual students or second language (L2) writing instruction. Situated in the area of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), this research investigates L2 undergraduate students' writing practice and development within and across the disciplines. Specifically, it looks into six Chinese international students' learning transfer from their First-Year Writing (FYW) course to disciplinary writing in the college years. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of adaptive transfer proposed by Depalma and Ringer (2011), this study redefines transfer in L2 writing and expands the research scope of transfer studies. It examines writing transfer from a new vantage point by including writers' creative and/or strategic transformation of learned knowledge.

Using the case study methodology, this research documents detailed processes of how international and multilingual students adapt and transform prior writing knowledge and experiences to construct discipline-specific literacy. The findings have captured a series of writing practices cutting across those students' approach to language, rhetoric, and genre and identified the factors that contextualize their writing practices.

*Keywords: L2 students, learning transfer, writing across the curriculum*

## Introduction

For an 18-year-old Chinese international student who flies thousands of miles to study at a U.S. university, what waits for him/her upon entering college is probably an English language proficiency test and then an (or a series of) English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course(s) including the First-Year Writing (FYW) course, all aiming to ensure the student's readiness to participate in an academic environment where the language and culture are totally different from what they come with. Indeed, language barrier is considered the greatest challenge that faculty members in higher education face in teaching international and multilingual students whose first language (L1) is not English (Sawir, 2011; Trice, 2003). (Those students are also considered L2 students since they speak English as a second language.) Hence, western Anglophone universities have invested heavily in developing language and literacy programs to help those students improve academic language proficiency and prepare them with sufficient academic skills to achieve success in their degree program (Terraschke & Wahid, 2011). While most universities in the U.S. have EAP and/or FYW programs, the connections between students' experiences in the EAP and/or FYW courses and other disciplinary content courses are still ambiguous to educators. In other words, if we agree that EAP courses (to some extent) serve the preparatory purpose for international and multilingual students' study in American higher education institutions, it merits full consideration what students learn in those courses and how they transfer the learning from those courses to fulfill other academic requirements throughout the college.

A great deal of research has been conducted to explore the nature of learning transfer (e.g., Barnett & Ceci, 2002; Beech, 1999; Butler, Godbole, & Marsh, 2013; Detterman, 1993; Foley & Kaiser, 2013; MacRae & Skinner, 2011), but with the increasing knowledge about how

and why learning transfer occurs or not, new questions and topics also keep emerging in this area (Day & Goldstone, 2012; Larsen-Freeman, 2013). Recently, more and more studies have been carried out on learning transfer with regard to academic literacy in higher education (Baik & Greig, 2009), but only a small number of them are pertinent to international and multilingual students' learning of advanced academic language in classrooms across the disciplines.

Moreover, language and literacy education research to a great extent represents international and multilingual students as disadvantage and examines their academic discourse socialization through a “deficit” lens (Grimshaw, 2011; Ryan, 2011). However, it is critical for educators to realize that academic language and literacy is highly contextualized and it needs to be gradually acquired by students through actively engaging with the materials they study in different courses, making sense of the texts they read, and generating ideas and interpretations. This acquisition process is embedded in each classroom which provides opportunities for them to “experiment with unfamiliar language and literacy practices, and construct new knowledge” (Zamel & Spack, 2006, p. 138).

In addition, international and multilingual students can be regarded as transnationals living between worlds, connected to both their home and host countries, and working towards future academic mobility (Gargano, 2012). Their sociocultural histories and shifting identities will also influence how they respond to the learning context and the assigned work in a certain classroom. As a heterogeneous group of learners, those students “do not begin from the same starting point, do not follow the same process of socialization, and do not end with identical outcomes” (Vasilopoulos, 2016, p. 20). Therefore, any attempt to simply generalize this group of learners (even some of them share the same linguistic and cultural background) or predict an individual learner should be given a second thought.

## Literature Review

Considering that undergraduate students in the U.S. will likely engage in various writing tasks throughout their academic life, educators in EAP and composition studies find it crucial to explore different levels and types of expertise required for academic writing across the curriculum and to observe the ways in which students switch writing practices for specific purposes in diverse disciplinary contexts (Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Prior, 1991; Russell, 1991). A large amount of research had been conducted to investigate students' writing practices across the curriculum at university with a focus on how they cope with institutional and sociocultural demands in different academic contexts (Currie, 1993; Harklau, 2000; Leki, 2001, 2003, 2007; Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997; Spack, 1997). More recently, scholars have started to pay particular attention to whether and how prior knowledge facilitates learning of a new writing task across contexts.

Some of them look at the transition from high-school writing to college writing (e.g., Artemeva & Fox, 2010; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011); others work on the development of college writing regarding the extent to which students adopt the composition knowledge and skills learned from EAP writing instructions to take on other writing tasks in the disciplines (e.g., Hansen, 2000; James, 2008, 2009). In these studies, learning transfer presented in students' textual features is taken as a sign of the development of writing expertise, and the extent of students' transferring writing practice beyond EAP courses is a criterion for the instructional efficacy of the course. Nonetheless, the construct of transfer in those studies seemed to be operationalized on students' survival strategies for varying writing tasks and the challenges involved in those tasks. Such a narrow view of transfer actually has limited the possibilities for researchers to detect students' active use of their prior composition knowledge and skills to

reconstruct the rhetorical situation in different writing contexts.

### **Rethinking EAP writing instructions and the FYW course**

Studies focusing on international and multilingual students' learning transfer (Casanave, 1990; Currie, 1993; Leki, 1995, 2001, 2007; Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997) had illustrated the students' perception of different writing demands across the curriculum and the strategies they developed to meet those needs as well as expectations in disciplinary writing. For example, Leki (1995) identified various writing strategies that international and multilingual students employed for writing tasks across contexts, e.g., relying on past writing experience, taking advantage of first language/culture, looking for models, using feedback, and accommodating teachers' demands. Nevertheless, the study also revealed that EAP writing instructions, such as the FYW course, was limited in regard to predicting students' writing experiences in different disciplinary courses because those writing experiences were both individualized and contextualized, encompassing more than a set of skills or a range of knowledge taught in EAP courses.

Undoubtedly, different kinds of expertise are demanded to perform writing tasks in the disciplines, and it is difficult for EAP writing instructions such as the FYW course to predict and cover all of them. In order to investigate learning transfer from FYW to disciplinary writing, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of students' writing tasks as well as practices in the disciplines. Such tasks and practices, depending on different disciplinary expectations and specific ways of knowing, take shape as genres in the disciplines (Bazerman, 1992, 1994; Bazerman & Russell, 2003; Russell, 1991, 1997). The role of genre as mediating social actions in disciplinary discourse and its impact on the development of academic literacy makes genre analysis an appropriate approach to examine student's disciplinary writing. In recent years, there has been a call for a reexamination of the role of genre in learning transfer in writing across the

curriculum, but scant research has been conducted to explore the process of students' development of genre-awareness in transferring prior composition knowledge and skills to new disciplinary contexts, especially international and multilingual students at undergraduate level. Since the dynamic view of writing recognizes that genres are open to change and rhetorical situations are constructed by both readers and the writer, the process of developing of genre awareness in response to discipline-specific needs along with international and multilingual students' agency in reshaping what was learned from the FYW course to fit the new tasks in disciplinary writing is the main interest of this research.

Casanave (2002) suggested that academic writing is a game-like practice organized by a set of conventionalized rules. It is shaped by interactions with other participants in the game, and transformed by a series of conflicting experiences that do not correspond to game rules. In fact, the transformation part entailed in academic writing indicates the room for change. If students are game players, the way they position themselves in writing determines whether they will simply follow the rules or try to modify them to meet their own needs. Such awareness of agency and the possibility of making changes is critical in the studies of international and multilingual students' writing experience. It is also compatible with a dynamic view of academic writing and learning transfer in writing instruction. As Canagrajah (2006) pointed out, multilingual writers are likely to utilize their language resources and learned composition knowledge in creative ways to achieve rhetorical purposes strategically.

Literature from the translingualism school has shifted the paradigm of L2 writing research and provided writing scholars as well as instructors with new theoretical frameworks to rethink multilingual writers' work. Meanwhile, they also shed light on transfer studies in EAP education and generated significant implications for writing instruction to international and

multilingual students. In particular, DePalma and Ringer (2011) proposed a theory of adaptive transfer to expand disciplinary discussions of transfer in L2 writing and composition studies.

The construct of adaptive transfer involves the processes that learners form relations of similarities and generalizations across different contexts (Lobato, 2003). Especially in multilingual writing, adaptive transfer depicts how writers become strategic composers (Carroll, 2002) as their meta-knowledge of language, genre and rhetorical form develops further, no matter in EAP writing courses or in other content courses in their disciplines. Furthermore, it recognizes international and multilingual students' L1 and native culture as resources, while not assuming that all instances of reformulation are appropriate or intentional. In short, the theory highlights the dynamic nature of composition knowledge and rhetorical contexts, and also emphasizes the idiosyncratic ways that individuals are aware of and interact with genres. This research adopted adaptive transfer as its theoretical framework and focused the analysis on students' genre practices.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Questions**

Adaptive transfer attempts to account for the reformulation of composition knowledge and skills that writers make to produce new ways of knowing and doing. It reveals an important point that transfer of learning can also be indirect and adjusted to serve the learners' new context of practice. However, more empirical studies are needed to delineate the issue of adaptive transfer and further develop the theory, and many fundamental questions in writing transfer such as when and how students reshape prior composition knowledge in new contexts remain to be answered. DePalma and Ringer (2014) had suggested a list of questions for adaptive transfer in writing. Based on that, this research attempts to address the following questions pertinent to

international and multilingual students' writing transfer:

1. *What kinds of composition knowledge and skills from EAP writing instructions (especially the FYW course) do international and multilingual undergraduate students identify as helpful?*
2. *What do those students' idiosyncratic processes of applying prior knowledge and experience to writing in the disciplines indicate about the nature of transfer? How does such transfer influence their learning of disciplinary discourse conventions?*

The author conducted multiple case studies to closely examine individual students' transfer of composition knowledge and skills across contexts to fulfill the requirements of writing and studying in the college years. Since the research questions are contextually specific and are addressing contemporary issues, they comply with the conditions of choosing a case study method proposed by Yin (2009). Besides, case study research can also be used to understand a larger population of similar units (Gerring, 2007), which enables this research to generate insights for more writing programs involving international and multilingual students.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The research was conducted at Midwestern University (pseudonym), a research university in the Midwest U.S. With a growing population of international students, the institution is linguistically and culturally diverse. Undergraduate students at Midwestern University are required to complete a 16-week FYW course – Writing 101 (pseudonym) before they get enrolled in their major studies. International students whose core educational backgrounds occurred in languages other than English will be recommended to take the multilingual version of the course – Writing 101 ML (pseudonym). The course objective of Writing 101 ML includes fundamental proficiencies in writing, which is considered to contribute



to students' readiness to enter into advanced study in their chosen disciplines.

In total, this research has six participants recruited from the FYW program. Four of them study in the Business School at Midwestern University with different majors including Finance, Accounting, and Entrepreneurship. The other two participants major in Psychology and Early Childhood Education respectively. The participants' major disciplines are considered a variable in this research which investigates the students' writing transfer from EAP instructions to disciplinary courses and how the transfer influences their learning of the disciplinary discourse conventions. Appendix A provides a profile of each participant. The author had recruited eight participants but decided to focus on the six Chinese international students with whom the author shared the same L1. In the informal individual meeting with the potential participants who responded to the recruiting material, the author had sensed the difficulties that L2 students had in explaining their own thinking and writing process in English, because they were not given the specific English language in composition studies that could accurately describe their writing experiences. However, all the participants – Michael, Sally, Roger, Rebeca, Steve, and Zoe (pseudonyms used for all) are from China and able to speak Chinese in the individual interviews with the author or in the focus group discussions with other participants. The interview data was collected in Chinese as it allowed the participants to express their thoughts more easily and freely. Then the interview recordings were transcribed and translated them into English. The original transcripts together with the translated copies were sent to a Chinese English professor in China for review to make sure that the translations captured the spirit of the original transcripts without distortion of meaning. In addition, the translated transcriptions were shared with the participants for member checking, since they were also proficient in English.

The participants' writing samples were collected from both the FYW course and other

disciplinary courses and then individual interviews were conducted based on the writing samples to discuss with the participants their writing process as well as individualized engagement in academic writing. To triangulate the findings, focus group discussions were held to inquire about the participants' understanding of different college genres and experiences of writing in the disciplines. The participants were also asked to submit a written reflection on their process of completing the writing task in a disciplinary course (the one that they shared with the author). Content analysis of the interview transcripts as well as students' written work had enabled the author to look into their writing practices through the lens of adaptive transfer and determine what kind of composition knowledge and skills the students consider helpful in EAP writing instructions (especially the FYW course) and how they adapt them to write across the curriculum.

For the purpose of this study, special attention was given to the signs of adaptive transfer, i.e., the evidence demonstrating students' transformation of their composition knowledge and skills as adapted to disciplinary expectations (Dannels, 2000; DePalma & Ringer, 2011). In particular, the author explored the ways in which international and multilingual students learn and develop a set of composition knowledge as well as skills to switch their genre practices between one writing context and another. Additionally, the contextual factors that come into play in students' genre practices was traced to generate curricular and pedagogical implications for instructors of both EAP and disciplinary courses to promote and facilitate those L2 students' adaptive transfer in academic writing.

### **Findings and Discussion**

In general, transfer refers to “how previous learning influences current and future learning, and how past or current learning is applied or adapted to similar or novel situations.

Transfer, then, isn't so much an instructional and learning technique as a way of thinking, perceiving, and processing information" (Haskell, 2001, p. 23). Therefore, when looking for the evidence of transfer in the participants' writing practice in and outside the FYW course, the author concentrated on how FYW instructions influence those student writers' thinking of writing itself, perceiving of the writing tasks and contexts, and processing of their prior knowledge as well as current information.

According to James (2010), four broader categories of learning outcomes were found to be transferable from EAP writing instructions (including the FYW): (1) *Content* (using resources and developing topics), (2) *Organization* (organizing and establishing coherence), (3) *Language use and mechanics* (using appropriate vocabulary and using appropriate syntactic patterns/devices), and (4) *Process efficiency* (using process knowledge and writing efficiently). In this research, the participants shared many commonalities in their transference of composition knowledge and skills across writing tasks and contexts, but in the meantime their practice of transfer and trajectory of writing development at college differed from each other, because their educational experience prior to college, dispositions towards learning, personality, and even family background were all in play. The following is a synthesis of cross-case findings and a discussion on implications.

### **Being Strategic in the Writing Process**

First of all, process efficiency was found the most salient composition knowledge and skill transferred from the FYW instruction. All the participants mentioned in the interviews that they had learned from the Writing 101 ML course a more comprehensive and effective writing process, which included planning, drafting, and revising and editing. Although they adopted various strategies at the pre-writing and revising stage, the student writers started to understand

an essential concept in composition—writing is a process rather than a mere product, and it often involves hard thinking. Prior to entering college, English writing to those L2 students were more about expression and translation. According to the student participants, in their home country China, no matter in the TOEFL or IELTS test preparation classes in academies or in the English language classes in high schools, English writing instruction was heavily influenced by the grammar-translation approach and all the students as well as the writing teachers tended to focus more on how to use the English language to express their Chinese thoughts. Although in the past thirty years, English teachers in China had tried to adopt a variety of English teaching methods from the West (among which communicative language teaching is the most popular), there are challenges in the EFL teaching context that prevent teachers from fully engaging students in the communicative activities during the teaching process (Rao, 2013; Wang, 2010). Hence, many teachers switch back to the traditional ways of teaching English and grammar translation is still widely practiced in present-day China (Du, 2021) .

The participants recognized that the value of the FYW course is more than just helping them fulfill the first-year writing requirements set by the university. Although not confident in her writing all along, Zoe said that the FYW course eased her anxiety about writing because she had practiced different types of academic writing in a “safe” place where her language skills were not judged. With that practice, she found herself equipped with the techniques to handle academic writing tasks—what to do before, during, and after writing. For example, she had learned to adopt the active reading skills for the tasks involving summary or reaction to readings and would also use the freewriting technique for brainstorming. FYW also helped Sally become more strategic during the writing process. She used to leave little time for revising because the majority of the time was wasted in struggle at the prewriting stage, but now she learned to

balance the time allocation for each stage of the writing process and realized that revising a draft was more than grammar check. In addition, Sally had developed a habit of making outlines to organize her ideas before writing so that she could write more efficiently. Therefore, the writing process they were introduced to and practiced in the FYW course had been evidently transferred beyond the course. Roger reported that thanks to the intensive training in the FYW course, he had become more skillful in writing and thus been able to complete writing tasks faster than before. All the other participants resonated with him in the focus group discussion and shared how they perceived the improved efficiency of their writing process as well.

Although the participants often found more differences than similarities among the writing tasks in different classes and, they were able to develop their own strategies based on the underlying knowledge and skills of composition. For instance, Rebecca had never written a research memo before taking the Business Analysis course but she applied and adapted the experience of research-paper writing in the FYW course to complete the task. While she encountered a new task and felt lacking guidance for it, the process knowledge of academic writing in general (i.e., planning, writing, and revising) had provided her with a clue of where to start. This demonstrated that when those students are put in the situations that push them to meet the writing challenges on their own (due to lacking or feeling lack of support), soliciting prior composition knowledge and skills becomes a necessity automatically.

### **Adapting to a Different Epistemology**

Furthermore, the FYW course has changed those students' way of thinking about writing. For instance, Michael had learned to analyze his target audience before writing and to look at his own writing from the audience's perspective. This reinforced audience awareness enabled him to understand writing as a means of communication rather than mere expression. Rebecca related

how her FYW instructor helped her dig deeper into the reading for a textual analysis paper and encouraged her to think more critically about the sources she found for a research paper. “When I went to office hours to discuss my drafts, he (the FYW instructor) often asked me to attend to more details in the text and to give my argument a second thought” (Rebecca, individual interview, 2019). It was also in the FYW course where Sally learned that “there were no easy answers” in good argumentation (quoted from Sally, individual interview, 2019). Even though she was already skilled in the argumentative writing, the course has freed her rigid way of writing and helped her develop new habits of mind.

I used to think that when I try to make an argument, I should stick to it and find only the evidence to support it. But now, I would also consider counterevidence to complicate my own argument so as to make it more compelling.

(Sally, individual interview, 2019)

The above quote from Sally also touched upon the point of “content” transfer (James, 2010), namely making good use of sources to deepen the exploration of a topic or problem. Research skills were mentioned by five out of the six participants (except Michael) during the interviews when they were asked about the most impressive and useful knowledge and/or skills learned from the Writing 101 ML course. This could be partially explained by the differences between Asian and American epistemology. Students coming from Asian epistemological tradition may find it new to them that knowledge construction is based on analytical arguments and making analytical arguments primarily means engaging with sources. Moreover, for the students who are new to a content area, broad and solid research skills can serve as their door opener. When Steve found it difficult to pick a topic for his assignment in the research method course in Psychology due to insufficient subject-matter knowledge, he solicited his experience in writing a research paper in the FYW course, for which he was also given the freedom to choose a topic of his interest and research into it. “Research” here is not limited to searching for sources

for a typical research paper. It also refers to collecting resources to prepare for writing. For example, Roger did research on the company at which he was applying for an internship to prepare for his cover letter writing.

It is worth mentioning that among the six participants, Roger and Steve went to high school in the U.S., while the others came to the U.S. for college. Roger's and Steve's cases showed that being exposed to the Western rhetoric and epistemology earlier could contribute to L2 students' readiness for tackling challenges in college writing. Experiences in the American high schools had also made them more confident in writing. Compared with them, Michael's experience was different. Before he came to study in the U.S., Michael had completed the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) in China. Mainly taught in English, the IBDP is an assessed program for students aged 16-19 and is considered a pathway to leading universities across the globe. Even though he was taught with a Western-style curriculum in an international high school in China, Michael's English writing did not reflect a Western way of thinking. Many of the sentences were blunt translations from Chinese to English, which might confuse the readers. Furthermore, his drafts were usually like freewriting without a clear logical flow. Michael admitted that for the research paper in Writing 101 ML, which required him to discuss an analysis-worthy topic by synthesizing multiple sources, he had to think in Chinese to develop ideas before starting to write in English. This approach had influenced not only his expression (e.g., the blunt translations) but also the organization of his writing because Chinese rhetoric differs from English rhetoric in many ways (You, 2010). For instance, argumentation in Chinese writing is structured in a way that writers provide reasons and/or contexts before giving out their main points. While argument as a means of persuasion plays an essential role of Western rhetoric, it is depreciated in Chinese culture since "it is equated with contentiousness,

with exaggerating differences, with decreasing mutual understanding, with undermining harmony” (Jensen, 1987, p. 233). Therefore, many Chinese do not have the habit of arguing in their rhetorical tradition (Gu, 2008) and found it difficult to structure their arguments according to the English writing conventions.

As a matter of fact, it was not realistic to expect first-year college students, who came from a foreign culture, spoke another language, and were educated with a different epistemology for about 18 years, to achieve the same level of language and academic competency as those students who studied in the U.S. education system for much more time. Ormrod (2004) argued that how people make sense of new knowledge is subject to culturally bounded epistemology. While “American epistemology places individualized knowledge acquisition at the center of learning and highly values analytical argument as a means of meaningful knowledge construction” (Hung & Hyun, 2010, p. 347), Asian epistemology tends to attach hierarchical human relationship to the positionality of the learning process, e.g., knowledge is from authority and uncertainty is to be avoided (Nisbett, 2003). That is why most of the participants found it difficult to be critical in analytical writing albeit their language proficiency, and being unclear about the instructors’ expectations or requirements would cause more stress for them. It will be helpful for faculty to show more patience with those students and whenever possible, allow them more time to understand and adjust to the new academic culture, which might contrast their past experiences and beliefs.

### **From Language Learners to Language Users**

Rebecca was the one who was seen to have successfully transferred her knowledge and skills of organization and structure to disciplinary writing. When she wrote the research memo for a case study in the Business Analysis course, she was not sure about the content or the format



due to lack of experience and guidance, but she had a clear idea about how to organize the information collected from research and make it understandable to the audience.

It (the research memo) was different from the research paper because I do not need to develop a topic or take a position. The task of the research memo was more straightforward – to do some research about the case and then discuss my findings with teammates to work out a solution together, so organizing the information I have is important. I need to make points out of the information rather than merely listing it. I saw that problem in my teammates' research memos when we did peer review in class. They listed a great deal of information but I do not know what they really wanted to say. I also helped them in our collaborative writing for the final report.

(Rebecca, focus group discussion, 2020)

Although not completely satisfied with her research memo, Rebecca was quite proud of her work in the collaborative writing of the final report for the case study. She said that the skills of building paragraphs she learned in the Writing 101 ML course were helpful in her individual writing and also in the collaborative writing with teammates. She knew that an effective paragraph should be focused and it was better to explore one point thoroughly in a paragraph rather than touching upon several points superficially. In her own research memo, she paid attention to topic sentences and carefully made transitions to help ideas flow. In the teamwork for the case study, Rebecca's teammates include L2 students from other countries and also L1 English speakers. While she admitted that they relied on the L1 English speaking peers to do the final editing and proofreading to avoid language problems, Rebecca had contributed to the substantial revision of the collaborative writing task, especially in organizing the whole team's ideas and structuring the whole paper.

They (L1 English speaking peers) are better at sentence level and helped fix the language problems on my part, but I did a lot on restructuring the report and reorganizing the paragraphs and they appreciated that as well. Those skills were what impressed me in the Writing 101 ML course, and I am glad that I can use them in other tasks.

(Rebecca, focus group discussion, 2020)

In the focus group discussion, all the other participants nodded when they heard the

above words from Rebecca. While those international and multilingual students recognized their limitations in English language, they did not necessarily see themselves as less competent writers compared to their L1 English speaking counterparts. Rebecca thought that her American peers had a linguistic advantage and more experience of writing in the U.S. education system, so they were assumed to be more skillful in handling academic tasks, but the FYW instruction had also equipped her with the fundamental knowledge and skills of academic writing to collaborate with and even help them in those tasks. In this sense, the FYW course had also given Rebecca the confidence to work with her L1 English speaking peers despite her linguistic disadvantage.

That being said, a major concern for most international and multilingual students is the potential problems in their language use in writing (typically, imprecise word choice and awkward expression due to blunt translation), because as L2 writers, they sometimes are not able to tell whether they have chosen the best way to express themselves or whether their L1 English speaking audience can understand them. While James (2010) suggested that language and mechanics (using appropriate vocabulary and syntactic patterns/devices) were proved to be transferable from EAP instructions, they were the least reported by the participants in this research. On the contrary, all of the students said that they needed to improve further their expression and vocabulary, and five of them (except Sally, who had received strict English grammar training back in China) thought grammar errors were a big problem in their writing.

In fact, it is understandable why the research participants did not see or were not aware of their language transfer from the FYW course to other writing contexts in the disciplinary courses. Firstly, given the nature of the Writing 101 ML course, language instruction was a small component of the curriculum (about 10% including sentence structure, rhetorical grammar, etc.) and grammar accounted for only 5% of the total grade for all the papers. Since first-year college

students have many other composition knowledge and skills to learn and practice in the FYW course, there is usually limited time left for language instruction. Secondly, expression and vocabulary cannot be improved visibly within a short period of time (e.g., a 16-week semester). More importantly, even though students get to practice their language skills in the FYW course, language use in different disciplines may vary and the language of a specific discipline could be new to them whenever they enter a new content area (Nguyen, Williams, & Trimarchi, 2015). All the participants agreed that they kept encountering and learning new words in their major studies, and their writing in the disciplinary courses to a large extent relies on imitating the language used in the assigned readings. Zoe even had a notebook collecting the vocabularies and expressions from the assigned readings, which she thought could be useful in her own writing. “That might not be a smart way to learn language, but is the only way that seems to work for me, especially in writing” (Zoe, individual interview, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

All of the participants perceived that they had achieved improvement in academic writing more or less after completing the FYW course, but it could be told from their writing samples and reflections in the focus group that stronger writers in the FYW course continued to be strong in other disciplinary courses while weaker writers seemed to keep struggling with writing in the discipline. The stronger writers (Sally and Rebecca) are independent learners who are more conscious about their own writing practices and experiences. Hence, they are able to achieve further transfer of composition knowledge and skills by identifying both the differences and similarities between prior and new tasks and develop new strategies by themselves. In contrast, the weaker writers (Michael and Zoe) tend to rely on more specific guidelines and they usually need the instructors to walk them through the writing process. However, those students are also

self-motivated and are willing to invest more time in learning writing. Additional support for writing outside the writing classes will enable them to achieve progress more efficiently. Roger and Steve appeared to be confident writers. The confidence comes from their oral proficiency and more experiences of studying in the U.S. Although it does not ensure their higher performance in academic writing, they seem to be coping with the challenges in writing tasks with more calmness and self-assurance. Even so, both of them commented in the written reflection in the focus group that the reflective writing prompts and the interview questions in this research had guided them to better understand their own processes of writing and learning to write. It follows that helping those students use the composition knowledge to theorize their own writing practices will make them more conscious of the strategies they have adopted and developed and transfer them further.

It is also to be noted that most international and multilingual students had little rhetorical knowledge in English writing before they came to study in the U.S., and their way of learning L1 writing could be totally different from how they learn to write in L2. That is why many of those students feel they need to learn English writing all anew when entering universities in the U.S. – academic writing is a way of learning and knowing, and it requires a deeper understanding of the culture of the academic community the writer is in. The meaning and value of EAP writing instructions, especially the FYW course, lies in introducing the academic culture and expectations and guiding them to view and learn writing in a new way that allows them not only to build on their prior knowledge and experiences, but also to develop strategies for future writing tasks in unfamiliar contexts. More importantly, continued support in writing in the disciplines is desirable so that the students are able to keep improving their academic literacy and competency. To put it another way, teaching writing is not only the responsibility of writing

teachers. Rather, disciplinary faculty are encouraged to use writing as a way to socialize the students into the discourse community. Besides designing writing tasks to help students acquire and generate knowledge in the disciplines, integrating instructions on writing in the discipline into the curriculum is also worthwhile pedagogical consideration.

All in all, it is essential for the faculty to understand international and multilingual students' developmental trajectories of academic skills and provide more patience to allow them to navigate the new environment, which is foreign to them in all senses. The FYW course is never a magic course or a boot camp that could turn novice writers into experienced writers within a short period of time (one semester or even one year). L2 students especially need more time to accustom themselves to not only the language that has not been used much in their life before but also the new ways of thinking and learning. If the faculty, whether in writing courses or disciplinary courses, could be aware of those student writers' needs as well as their conscious or unconscious writing practices, they might be able to provide support more pertinently and facilitate the transfer to accelerate their students' writing development at college.

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### Appendix A: Profiles of the Six Participants

	<u>Nationality and transnational experiences</u>	<u>Years studying in the U.S. when the research began</u>	<u>Major and minor studies at college</u>	<u>Educational background before college</u>
<b>Michael</b>	Chinese; arrived in the U.S. at the age of 18 for college	One year	Major in Finance and minor in Entrepreneurship	Graduated from an international high school in China and enrolled in an International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) <sup>1</sup> to prepare for study overseas. Also took the TOEFL <sup>2</sup> test to apply for universities in the U.S.
<b>Sally</b>	Chinese; arrived in the U.S. at the age of 19 for college	One year	Major in Accounting and minor in Math	Graduated from a private high school in China and had studied in a Chinese University for one year when she also went to an academy to prepare for the IELTS <sup>3</sup> test
<b>Roger</b>	Chinese; arrived in the U.S. at the age of 16 for high school	Four years and a half	Major in Finance and minor in Technology Management	Graduated from a private high school in the U.S.
<b>Rebecca</b>	Chinese; arrived in the U.S. at the age of 18 for high school	One year	Double major in Finance and Accounting	Dropped out from a public high school in China due to depression and spent one year overcoming depression while preparing for the TOEFL test
<b>Steve</b>	Chinese; arrived in the U.S. at the age of 16 for high school; lived in Singapore during kindergarten years	Four years	Major in Psychology	Graduated from a private high school in the U.S. and took college-prep courses in high school

<sup>1</sup> International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) is an assessed program for students aged 16-19 and is considered a pathway to leading universities across the globe.

<sup>2</sup> Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a standardized test to measure the English language competency of the students whose first language is not English and who wish to enroll in English-speaking universities.

<sup>3</sup> The International English Language Test System (IELTS) is an international standardized test of English language proficiency for speakers whose first language is not English.

<b>Zoe</b>	Chinese; arrived in the U.S. at the age of 17 for college	One year	Major in Early Childhood Education	Graduated from a public high school in China; obtained the diploma within 1.5 years and then went to an academy to prepare for the TOEFL test
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