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Chapter 4

Turning the Spotlight to International Students’ Internal Negotiations: Critical Thinking in Academic Writing
Ly Thi Tran

The case study reported in this chapter explores how four Chinese and Vietnamese international students from two disciplines, Economics and Education, mediated their ways of displaying critical thinking in disciplinary writing at an Australian university. It draws on a modified version of Lillis’s (2001) heuristic and positioning theory (Harre’ & van Langenhove, 1999) for the interpretation of students’ writing practices within an institutional context. The study includes four talks around texts, which engage the students in an exploration of their practices in demonstrating their critical thinking in their first texts at the university, and four in-depth interviews six months later, which aim to examine how students negotiated their writing practices as they progressed through their course.

Morrison, Merrick, Higgs, and Le Mactais (2005) argue that a large body of literature concerning international students in English-medium institutions has worked from a “deficit model” and tends to problematize international students. Challenges facing international students in English-medium higher education have often been assumed to be related to cultural differences. The discourse of cultural differences contributes to some extent to our understandings of some of the preferred learning ways and values Asian students may bring with them into Western institutions. However, within the current changing global context, which is associated with cross-border education and student mobility, relying too much on the link between cultural factors and the images of Asian students may limit the possibilities of exploring complexities and variables as well as invisible aspects in international student’s processes of participation in institutional practices. International students’ individual intentions, personal preferences and personal agency, which tend to represent what may lie behind their personal practices and mediate their ways of constructing knowledge, remain largely invisible across various studies. The study reported in this chapter is an attempt to respond to this gap in the literature.

Based on an analysis of individual students’ writing experiences, it will be argued that all the students in the study seemed to employ a similar coping strategy, namely accommodation, to achieve their academic goals and empower themselves in their disciplinary community. However, underlying that common umbrella of accommodation are their different stories of mediating ways of demonstrating their critical thinking skills and exercising their personal agency. For example, while Wang and Xua’n both positioned themselves as wanting to conform to disciplinary expectations in terms of critical writing, and spoke with the voice of an Asian student who appeared to be unfamiliar with the concept of critical thinking, their experiences in writing varied a great deal. Wang tended to disguise her belief and drew on what she referred to as “pretension” through inventing gaps in experts’ research as her initial coping strategy. Xua’n, on the contrary, in her attempt to write critically, resorted to comparing and contrasting different authors based only on their good points. The students’ different experiences in engaging in academic writing in their disciplines indicates a need to avoid essentializing Chinese and Vietnamese students into a homogeneous Asian group who are often characterized as over-conformist, lacking in initiative, and lacking in critical thinking abilities (Hu, 1989; Nash, 1991; Osajima, 1988, cited in McKay & Wong, 1996; Vandermensbrugghe, 2004). The analysis of the data also shows that international students’ internal struggles in mediating critical thinking involve a complex web of factors, which appear to be unrecognized on the surface of their writing, such as their intrinsic motivations, their individual life histories, their experiences in writing, and their personal interests and preferences.

**International Students and Academic Writing within English-Medium Institutional Contexts**

International students’ experience in disciplinary writing in English-medium institutions can be linked to the negotiation of ways of writing into which they have been socialized and the academic requirements within their new institutional contexts. It may be at the same time related to their endeavour to mediate between different sources of identities rooted in their personal experiences and personal factors. International students’ personal attributes, their prior literacy, and their awareness of the writing requirements in their disciplinary fields contribute to shaping their writing in higher education. Students’ writing practices thus
should be viewed in relation to the ways students as language producers with their own preferences, interpretations, and experiences of academic writing may struggle to respond to the disciplinary requirements and have some influence upon the written discourse practices of their fields.

A large body of research indicates that as international students come from different cultures, they may prefer different cognition and learning styles (Cadman 1997; Connor, 1996; Fox, 1994; McKay, 1993; Ryan, 2000). In light of this, we can conclude that international students have been brought up with particular ways of interpreting and describing the world and of reflecting this in their writing. There are, therefore, particular approaches to knowledge in different cultures that may have an impact on international students’ interpretations of the ways written arguments should be constructed. Some research, however, suggests the need to treat this assumption with caution and indicates that individual factors seem to shape one’s writing quality more than cultural patterns (Sasaki & Hirose, 1996; Kubota, 1998). Others argue against the cultural generalizations of Asian students as passive learners lacking in critical thinking skills (Littlewood, 2000; Stapleton, 2002).

Contrastive rhetoric as advocated by Kaplan (1966) and Connor (1996) is concerned with the preferred cultural patterns of thinking and writing amongst students from different cultures. Kaplan highlights the different rhetorical organizations of ideas in different writing traditions. Indicated in his “doodles” article (1966) is the transfer of first language writing conventions to second language writing practice. Kaplan’s research offers insights into how second language texts are constructed. His article has, however, been disputed for generalizing the writing approaches of different language groups, for example, all Asians as “Oriental” who use an “indirect approach” (Hyland, 2003, p. 46). Thus, in the past two decades, research into academic writing has recognized the significance of the processes involved in writing the texts (Badger & White, 2000; Caulk, 1994; Jordan, 1997). Hence, in addition to the written product, internal and external factors that affect the writing process and experiences the student writers have gone through are worth being studied. Furthermore, the fact that early contrastive rhetoric made generalizations about first language “thought patterns” of students based only on an examination of their second language writing reveals a deterministic view of writers’ cultural backgrounds (Hyland, 2003; Leki, 1993; Matsuda, 2001). Such generalizations, which are not based on evidence about students’ reflections on their intentions in constructing texts, cannot be considered reliable information for teachers (Matsuda, 2001). This offers grounds for the selection of the talk around text model (Lillis, 2001) in my research design. This framework enables the students in the study reported here to reflect on their practices in writing their own texts. Thus, it offers an insightful interpretation of student writing that looks beyond the “surface” of the texts and generalizations about student writers’ cultural backgrounds to better account for the complexity of factors that may affect students’ writing.

As academic writing plays an important role in students’ success in higher education, they often try to accommodate the academic requirements in their disciplinary discourse communities. The power of a discourse community is embedded in its conventions, and its power is thus partially maintained through the ways its conventions are expected to be put into practice in writing. Going hand in hand with the issues of power relations and the critique of a discourse community when represented as framed and homogenous, the question of the exclusive nature of academic discourse has been raised in related literature (Fairclough, 1995; Lillis, 2001; Starfield, 2001; Gardener, 1992, cited in Lillis, 2001). In explaining the claim that an academic discourse community is exclusive, Clark (1992) maintains that the rules of the discourse community are often determined by the teaching staff of the community and thus “it is easier for staff to flout those rules than students” (p. 118). Fairclough (1995, p. 243) and Lillis (2001, p. 24) share the view that diversity in meaning making as the result of students’ attempts to tailor their communication in conformity with context and audience is limited in the sense that the notion of “appropriateness” in this regard is associated with a set of “clear-cut” conventions that hold for all members of the so-called homogenous community. “Discourse community” is characterized by Ritchie (1998, p. 128) as a “closed and unified system” and students must learn the forms of the language as well as ways of making meanings demanded in that community — this reflects features of transmission pedagogy. In this respect, a discourse community is seen as homogenous and restricted since student success in participating in it is mainly dependent on their efforts to conform to its conventional practices rather than on their own ways of constructing meanings.
Capturing international students’ experiences in participating in disciplinary written discourse has become an area of increasing significance since academic writing is a central higher education practice. This emerging research stream moves beyond past research with much emphasis on exploring the writing problems international students have. It has focused more on viewing international students as individuals attempting to enter a community of practice and become a member of their discipline. As a result, issues concerning cultural values and disciplinary beliefs surrounding student writing tend to be taken into account in an increasing number of studies. Yet students’ agency and personal factors, which represent what may lie behind their attempts to mediate their writing and adapt to academic expectations, remain largely invisible across various studies on student writing at the tertiary level.

Research Design
A qualitative case study approach was adopted to construct stories of individual Vietnamese and Chinese students participating in disciplinary writing. A case study (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2006) explores the complexities of students’ experiences rather than drawing hard and fast conclusions. Moreover, a qualitative case study is appropriate for the nature of this research since it focuses on insights, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing (Merriam, 1998, p. 28). As the accommodating process of individual Chinese and Vietnamese students can be multifaceted, a case study approach allows opportunities to document students’ diverse writing experiences. This provides insights into how they mediate their writing and manage to respond to disciplinary requirements.

For several reasons, the case studies reported here focus on Chinese and Vietnamese international students in Education and Economics. China is one of the leading sources of international students for Australian institutions (AEI, 2006). At the university where this project was conducted, international students from China comprise the largest proportion of international students. In addition, recent analysis has revealed that at this university there has also been growth in the number of postgraduate students from Vietnam. Chinese and Vietnamese students from two disciplines, Economics and Education, were selected for the study. Economics is the largest faculty at the university and it has the largest enrolment of international students. Education is another program at the university, which has recently seen a rise in the number of international students. The students in this study were required to meet cut-off IELTS scores of 7.0 and 6.5 to gain entry to their master’s course in Education or Economics, respectively. These four students were selected because they met the descriptive criteria above. They volunteered to participate in the study and were willing to reflect on their experiences of writing their first texts at an Australian university, as well as how they participated in disciplinary writing as they progressed through the course six months later. All respondents presented in this study are referred to under pseudonyms.

To date, research in the area has explored students’ written texts mainly from the view of an “outsider” such as an analyst, a researcher, or a teacher (see, e.g., Pilis, 1996; Tarnopolsky, 2000). The study reported here, by contrast, seeks to understand how students negotiate their academic writing in a Western university, from an insider or emic perspective. Each student participant was invited to a one-hour interview in which he/she was asked to talk about his/her selected text. The talk aimed to engage students in explorations of their experiences of writing these specific texts and how they exercised their agency to mediate their writing and adapt to disciplinary practices. The talks around text were conducted from four to eight weeks after the students had completed these texts.

Lillis’s (2001) heuristic for exploring student meaning making was adopted for the data collection and data analysis of this study. This heuristic is based on three sets of questions: How can you say it/how do you want to say it? What can you say/what do you want to say? Who can you be/who do you want to be? Lillis’ framework is relevant for this study since it offers an opportunity to avoid “surface judgments being made about students’ intentions through their writing” (Jones, Turner, & Street, 1999, p. xvii). I have adopted the overall idea of Lillis’ framework and adapted it to suit the aims and context of my study. Here, rather than the “who” question, the “how” and “what” questions have been more focused and a “why” question has been added. This modification aims to understand students’ negotiations of different interpretations of academic writing through what/how they think they are required to write and what/how they desire to write. The “why” question in turn helps to tease out the underlying factors influencing why students wrote in the ways revealed in their texts and why they may wish to write a certain way. At the same time, students’ identities are also revealed through their responses to the “why” questions. On the basis of Lillis’s model, I asked the Chinese and Vietnamese students to talk about how they negotiated their writing of their first texts and adapted to disciplinary practices through three main sets of questions: what you thought you were expected to write/what you wanted to write; how you thought you were required
to write/how you wanted to write; and why you thought you were expected to write so/why you wanted to write so. Without these stories about what/how/why students wrote in a certain way, their intentions and desires in meaning-making would remain a mystery. In addition to the talks around text, an in-depth interview was conducted six months later to see how students might have changed their views as they progressed through their courses.

Positioning theory (Harre’ & van Langenhove, 1999) was used alongside Lillis’s model to interpret how the students positioned themselves, and their personal approaches to writing and disciplinary requirements. Positioning theory refers to the possibilities of individual’s multiple and contradictory interpretations and multiple identities within multiple discursive practices. Harre’ and van Langenhove (1999, p. 17) contend, “Fluid positionings, not fixed roles, are used by people to cope with situations they usually find themselves in.” Positioning theory highlights shifts in positions as narratives unfold and as people interact with artifacts within discursive practices (Davies & Harre’, 1999). Initial positionings can be challenged, and this leads to possibilities for individuals to reposition themselves, thereby reconstructing their identities. People thus experience changes through opportunities to exercise agency and create new positions for themselves. The possibility of contradictory discursive positioning is necessary for individuals to exercise agency and make changes (Harre’ & van Langenhove, 1999). This view is relevant for the context of this study, which took into account that the students would confront different ideas about academic writing as newly enrolled students embarking on their first assignments and experience changes in coping with disciplinary requirements. As a result, their former interpretations of academic writing could be contradicted and challenged. The students could shift their beliefs and actively negotiate ways of constructing meaning in light of different beliefs in an attempt to take control of their writing practices and thus their academic life. Through reshaping their interpretations and repositioning themselves, the students would be taking action to achieve their goals. In this way, positioning theory explores the multiple interpretations, intentions, and possibly changing positions of this study’s subjects when participating in their written discourse communities.

There are three main forms of positioning which arise from the students’ accounts in this study: situations of self-positioning, situations of forced self-positioning, and situations of positioning of others. Self-positioning arises when one wishes to express his/her personal agency to achieve a particular goal in discursive practice (van Langenhove & Harre’, 1999, p. 24). With regard to forced self-positioning, van Langenhove and Harre’ (1999, p. 26) propose that it is different from deliberate self-positioning in that “the initiative now lies with somebody else rather than the person involved.” In the case of this study, forced self-positioning is related to how the students positioned themselves in the ways they think they are required by their lecturers or their subject disciplines. Other positioning means that one’s intentional positioning of oneself in a certain way can lead to the positioning of someone else in the correlative position (van Langenhove & Harre’, 1999).

Students’ Accounts of How to Demonstrate Critical Thinking in Academic Writing
The two students in Education decided to take Second Language Development as their first subject in their master’s program. For their first assignments, they were asked to write an essay of about 2500 words on one of a set of given topics related to second language development such as how input, age, motivation, or formal instruction influence second language acquisition. Of the two students in Economics, one worked on a 2500-word essay on a given topic on human resource management, and the other wrote about communication and promotion management. The first essays written by the students have been chosen as the focus of this study because they were seen as particularly challenging. International students’ first texts for their master’s courses are often where the transition space and the clash between disciplinary requirements and their former interpretations of writing occurs. Hence, this may be the place where students have to struggle hard to negotiate between their initial interpretations of academic writing and disciplinary requirements.

Critical Thinking — A Sort of Pretension
Wang is an international student from mainland China, who was enrolled in the Master of Education program. The text she talked about was the first assignment for the first subject, Second Language Development. Wang decided to work on the topic: “How input influences second language acquisition.” As critical thinking appears to be a contentious issue in the literature (Adamson, 1993), students are left on their own to interpret what it means to use critical thinking in writing. In her talk around text, Wang revealed she relied on “pretension” as her initial strategy. She assumed she had to identify the weaknesses of famous authors’ work in order to demonstrate her critical thinking skills and satisfy her lecturer’s expectations. Reflecting on her writing, Wang said:
I know after reviewing all the opinions, the lecturer expects me to write something about my understanding. So I tried to write this part but this part is really difficult for me because I think all the studies are beautiful and I couldn’t see anything there, I tried very very hard to say something like thisy. (Wang’s talk around text, p. 6)

It can be seen that Wang’s approach to critical thinking was dependent on what she thought her lecturer expected her to do. She expressed her critical view in her essay through such wordings as “there was not very much discussion” and “might be another interesting research area” (Wang’s essay, p. 5). According to her, she struggled very hard to write these parts of her essay, since she was shaped by her own admiration for the experts’ ideas and writing. Within Lillis’s (2001) talk around text model, Wang’s reasoning for her approach to critical thinking, which seemed to be invisible on the surface of her writing, was uncovered based on exploring how she thought she was (or was not) expected to demonstrate this critical thinking and how she struggled to do so.

In elaborating on how she evaluated the literature, Wang explained, “I pretend to say something to show my understanding about other people’s studies......it’s a sort of pretension” (Wang’s talk around text, p. 2). She argued that this habit was influenced by her Chinese collective way of thinking: “That means I should think as other people think and I should not say something different. I should behave like other people. I just anticipated this sort of context for so many years” (Wang’s talk around text, p. 2). Within the talk around text framework, Wang tended to be influenced by her voice as experience, which Lillis (2001) refers to as a dimension of life or cultural experience a student might bring into her writing. What Wang referred to as “pretension” in her approach to critical thinking reflected a communal ideology of constructing knowledge valued in Chinese culture (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). That is, knowledge tends to be built up in a communal harmonious way with significant efforts from community members to avoid tension in communication. Being shaped by this collective spirit, Wang’s earlier way of developing arguments was thus tied to her attempt to avoid tension in writing by accepting others’ views rather than criticizing them.

Lillis’s talk around text heuristic helped to reveal that Wang’s effort to expose her personal agency through writing critically was complex. She preferred accommodation when confronted with the academic demands of her discipline; however, she lacked the ability to do so since she was previously unfamiliar with this way of constructing arguments. Her reflection on this specific instance of meaning making was an example of forced self-positioning. Harre’ and van Langenhove (1999) argue that this situation occurs when the initiative for individual positioning arises from the expectations of another person who represents an institution (p. 26).

Wang forced self-positioned as a student who attempted to conform to what she felt her lecturer wanted to hear in terms of critical thinking. It appeared that Wang was caught between the way she thought she was required to write in English at an Australian university and her past experience of writing in Chinese. As a result, in response to the disciplinary positioning and expressing her agency through attempting to situate herself in a more powerful position in relation to her disciplinary discourse, Wang drew on “pretension” as her coping strategy. Unlike Hao, a Chinese student in Economics who found her experience in disguising her beliefs and accommodating disciplinary requirements unpleasant, Wang felt positive about her attempts: “Even I have to struggle and I consider the process of struggle as the ways to learn things and I don’t want to stick to my own ways” (Wang’s talk around text, p. 4). She thus exercised strategic agency by drawing on committed adaptation to take control of her writing practice and her academic life.

In the later in-depth interview, Wang revealed:

You start to know academically you are not supposed to accept whatever written in the textbook, it’s shared knowledge and everybody can contribute to that knowledge and you have to be critical and ask questions. This is also what I’ll tell my students to do and sort of training, not very systematic but I’ll try to help them to understand that nothing is perfect and you have to ask questions to the things you read....If I am supposed to write something academic, I am not scared, I mean I am now confident in writing this sort of things.

Wang’s attempts reveal that she has gone through different stages in her personal construction of how to manifest critical thinking and make meaning in academic writing. Initially, she assumed she had to identify the weaknesses of famous authors’ work to demonstrate her critical thinking skills. As she progressed through her course, she built a more positive attitude toward critical thinking through her awareness of questioning “shared knowledge” in textbooks rather than simply accepting it. In terms of critical thinking, moving from her former habit of constructing arguments to what she was required to do in her course appeared to go along with a shift from “pretending” to having enough courage and confidence to criticize others’ views. This shift also reflects her emerging maturity in taking control of her writing practice and her academic life. Her personal
transformation regarding critical writing was by no means simple but rather was dynamic, complex, and multilayered.

Critical Thinking — Focusing Only on the Strengths of Others’ Studies
Xua’n is from Vietnam and was enrolled in a Master of Education program. She chose the topic “how age affects second language acquisition” for her first assignment in the Second Language Development class. She tended to engage in a hybrid adaptation in demonstrating her critical thinking skills in her first text for this course. To her, critical writing was related to how she could compare and contrast different views. Xua’n talked about how she attempted to be critical:

I like the way I organize this argument……For example, for phonological [the topic of her text], I could find some people who did some research study about phonological and it was interesting that I could find someone who thinks that young learners are better in acquiring phonological while the others think that the older people are better. So I mean it is interesting to see that two opposing views on that and then I can look at what their studies are and how they argue…..Then I myself can judge what is the strong point and good point of each argument so that I can give my own idea on that rather than just said that this person said that, the other person said that….At that moment, you can jump in and say something about that like ‘I think this is….’. (Xua’n’s talk around text, p. 2)

In the preceding quote, Xua’n stressed the significance of finding mismatches among different sources as her strategy for critical thinking. In addition, she highlighted the need to focus on identifying the strong points of each view. She did not seem to struggle to comment on negative aspects of researchers’ work (as other students in this study did). Rather, her strategy allowed her to avoid emphasizing the weaknesses of experts’ studies and placed her in a more comfortable position. She employed the following words to talk about her critical writing approach used: “I like the way,” “it is interesting to see that two opposing views,” “it was interesting that I could find,” “I could find” (three times), “I can” (four times), and “I myself can” (twice). Xua’n’s vocabulary usage illustrated she felt quite positive and confident about her way of being critical of other research, and it was contrary to the one adopted by Wang and Lin when these students struggled to identify only the flaws in the experts’ studies. In light of Lillis’s talk around text model, how Xua’n demonstrated her critical thinking was shaped by how she thought she could say and how she wanted to say. There seemed to be no mismatch between her commitment to respond to the disciplinary demands and her personal values. She appeared to position herself as being quite comfortable with her strategy for critical writing.

In the later interview, Xua’n demonstrated more complex perceptions of critical thinking:

It’s some kind of comparing or contrasting. That’s because Vietnamese culture, in our educational background, we don’t have critical thinking, it’s very difficult for me to know about that, to evaluate an author when you always think that that person is high above you, that person is very knowledgeable, that’s the person who can write the book. That’s person is so right, so good, something like that. Actually, I am starting with comparing and contrasting, I read that author and the other authors and then I think okay, they have their good point of views and how they argue that and then I think that okay that’s person is more convincing. (p. 1)

Xua’n acknowledged that she found it challenging to understand the concept of critical thinking in her course. She revealed that in Vietnamese culture, comments on others’ work should be “Good thing, not bad thing” (p. 8). Like Wang, who claimed that she was influenced by her Chinese culture, Xua’n also brought along her voice as experience (Lillis, 2001, p. 45) and believed that it did not seem sensible to be “critical” of a person who had the authority of a writer of a book and was thus more knowledgeable than her. This aspect has been discussed in the literature (Nguyen, 1989; Tran, 1999) as deriving from the Vietnamese tendency to respect authority and value harmony in knowledge-building. For this reason, Xua’n resorted to her hybrid strategy of comparing and contrasting, focusing on the good points of authors’ work. While finding it difficult to evaluate, this coping strategy (Leki, 1995) seemed to put her in a safe position and gave her more confidence in writing. It seemed that by employing this strategy, Xua’n reached a compromise among her beliefs, her voice, and her wish to participate in the academic community. This hybrid adaptation enabled her to avoid pointing out the weaknesses of authors’ work and preserve her own view of critical writing, while at the same time allowing her to engage in her academic writing within her discipline.

Critical Thinking — Being Critical of the Topic Itself
Hao was a Chinese student enrolled in a Master of Applied Commerce program. She chose the topic “Strategic human resource management: significance and barriers” for her first essay. In her talk about writing her text, she appeared to tackle a different aspect of critical thinking. She revealed that she attempted to be critical of the topic itself but her effort was discouraged by her lecturer. Hao showed her dissatisfaction at not being allowed to discuss her thoughts on this matter:

I found someone’s interesting argument about this topic, just like this paragraph. His argument [one of the references Hao used in her essay] does not actually meet the requirement for this essay. I really want to use his argument in my essay and I discussed this with my lecturer. She said ‘it’s not good for you to say too much about his argument’ because it does not quite meet what she wants we said in this essay. So I just use a small paragraph......Because in this essay we should, we must, we must say that HRM [human resource management] is important and helps us but for his argument, he said that HRM is not really important in some cases. You know the lecturer gives us a topic but I think I can have different opinion with this topic, maybe I can give the evidence for the different way from this topic but after I talked with my lecturer, I know that I must write that it is important and I cannot say that it is not important. (Hao’s talk around text, p. 6)

It would appear from Hao’s account that she wanted to be critical of the subject matter or implied thesis statement and to put forth a contrasting view. Yet her awareness of the lecturer’s expectations prevented her from doing so. Her linguistic choices — “I found someone’s interesting argument,” “I quite agree with him and I really want to use his argument” — versus “we should,” “we must,” “we must say that,” “I know that I must write that it is important and I cannot say that it is not important,” appeared to indicate the tension between her personal desire to be critical in writing and her interpretation of the disciplinary requirements. Thus, the ways Hao constructed meaning revealed that her writing was regulated by what the lecturer wanted her (not) to say rather than what she really wanted to say. In light of Lillis’s (2001) framework, this revealed a mismatch between her actual way of writing and her potential choice with regard to the content in this writing assignment. Therefore, in this specific instance of meaning making, Hao forced self-positioned (Harre’ & van Langenhove, 1999) as a student who attempted to respond to the voices that she thought the lecturer as the representative for the institution in this case wanted to hear. Hence, she demonstrated her strategic agency through making face value adaptation to allow her to gain access to the academic world.

Hao, however, other-positioned her lecturer as regulating what students should and should not say in writing, thereby unconsciously not allowing any possibility for her to demonstrate her critical thinking skills and engage in shaping the disciplinary written discourse. This highlighted how the relations of power embedded in the lecturer’s expectations were exercised and maintained through the way the preferred writing content was reproduced (Fairclough, 1995; Lillis, 2001; Matsuda, 2001; Ritchie, 1998). Her case indicated that the student was self-positioning because of the forced self-positioning of the lecturer. The lecturer positioned Hao as being concerned with giving the lecturer what she was asking for. She did not disagree with the lecturer because of the power relationship. Hao’s account was compelling since in the attempt to gain access to the disciplinary community and empower herself in her chosen discourse, she had to disguise her beliefs through excluding from her writing the arguments she favored.

Critical Thinking — Reflecting Theory on a Specific Context
Vy was a Vietnamese student undertaking a Master of Economics program. The text she focused on was a case study in which she was required to apply theories about communication and promotion management she had learned during the course. She decided to analyze a recent advertising campaign for Heineken beer in Vietnam. The approach to critical thinking Vy used in this assignment was different from the ones adopted by the three students discussed earlier. This emerged in part from the nature of her text, which was a case study, while others worked on argumentative essays. Her critical thinking in this work was tied to her attempts to reflect the case in the Vietnamese context, rather than on evaluating related studies as the other three students did in their argumentative essays. Vy explained how she attempted to be critical in her text:

It may be more funny for the Western people, the thing that wine is more luxury and beer is something for thirst but in Vietnam, it’s different. That’s why here I have to be critical because I can’t apply my own idea about that, I have to think about the situation in Vietnam and I have to ask my friends in Vietnam, someone already goes to bar, already drinks a beer. In the eyes of the target market, what they think about Heineken beer. What I got from them is that it’s very expensive, it’s
very nice, number one or kind of thing, so that’s what I think I have to be critical a bit. I do a bit of research on the websites and what they think about Heineken is not so serious like what I think. nha’ mi’nh [in our home country] while in the rural area or the countryside, the domestic local beer is cheap, about 2,000 dong [Vietnamese currency] or 3,000 dong a bottle while Heineken is very expensive, around 13,000 a can. (Vy’s talk around text, p. 3).

In this case, Vy demonstrated her critical thinking by not accepting what was indicated on the websites but instead trying to look at the product from the viewpoint of consumers in the target market. According to her, Heineken was just a normal beer for quenching thirst in Western countries, whereas in Vietnam it was considered a luxurious and expensive beer for those who “showed themselves as being outgoing, upscale and stylish” (Vy’s text). To be critical in this respect, she employed two main tools: collecting information from websites and data from her friends who were beer drinkers in Vietnam.

Her critical thinking was bound to the evaluation of the Western perception on the status of the product by reflecting it onto the market situation in Vietnam. Vy further explained that her approach to critical thinking was expected by her lecturer: “For this one, the lecturer said that we don’t have to do a lot of research and literature review and criticize this one a bit and support this one but here we have to apply the idea [the model she learned in class] and we try to integrate it into the case’’ (p. 4). As indicated in Vy’s text and her perceptions of the lecturer’s expectations, the critical thinking skills required in a case study differed substantially from the skills required for a literature review. In light of the talk around text framework (Lillis, 2001), the reason why she did not attempt to evaluate much related literature was revealed and like Hao, who was discussed in the previous section, Vy’s way of being critical was influenced by what she thought she needed to do. However, while Hao felt forced into doing so and just made a face-value adaptation, Vy seemed comfortable and positive about her attempts to respond to her lecturer’s expectations. This links to the form of committed adaptation she adopted in her disciplinary writing.

**Conclusion**

Insights into stories of these four students producing their own academic texts help to reveal the varying reasons underpinning their ways of constructing knowledge in general and the variable shades of critical thinking in particular. The students’ different practices in engaging in academic writing within the disciplines of Education and Economics confirm the need to avoid lumping Chinese or Vietnamese students into a homogeneous Asian group. This finding is congruent with an emerging theme in the literature that tends to challenge generalizations of Asian students as passive learners (Koehne, 2005; Biggs, 1997; McKay & Wong, 1996) and calls for the need to explore issues of subjectivity and identity with international students rather than just locating them in certain cultural groups (Koehne, 2005). It is also noticeable from the analysis of the writing accounts of the students in this study that their culture is not the only factor that influences their approaches to displaying critical thinking. Rather, the study found their internal struggles in mediating among different ways of writing involved a complex web of factors, which appear to be unrecognized or invisible on products. This is important because we can conclude that ethnic background did not play a dominant role in these students’ writings but instead interacted with other factors. When culturally influenced ways of writing are reproduced, it is not typically in simple and uniform ways, but rather is personally adapted by individuals through intentional use and transformation. Therefore, to understand international students’ writing practices, it seems valuable to turn the spotlight to their internal struggles in mediating writing rather than merely exploring differences among cultures’ writing norms.

In recent decades, students have entered universities from a wide range of educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. The learning contexts they are located in are diverse and no longer reflect “traditional academic subject boundaries” with conventional values and norms (Lea & Stierer, 2000). In parallel with these important changes, in recent years in Australian, American, and British higher education, there has been an expansion in the cohort of international students, who add to the heterogeneity of the student body. Thus, universities are making various attempts to help international students adapt to institutional requirements and transition to institutional contexts. However, international students’ participation in disciplinary communities is not fully facilitated since students are often expected to adapt to what is required of them and are seldom provided with opportunities or strategies to negotiate their preferences and values. This one-sidedness seems to ignore the heterogeneity of the student body and the heterogeneity of ways of meaning-making and the emergence of alternative practices embedded in students’ values.

The students’ accounts suggest the need for academics to work toward ways to articulate the underpinning constructs of critical thinking in more concrete ways rather than use abstract terms to refer to it. In addition, it
also appears important to teach students how to mediate ways of displaying critical thinking in their writing. Hao’s struggle, for instance, indicates that the lecturer’s expectation as a gatekeeper made her decide to keep her argument voiceless and thus restrained her from her first attempts in negotiating critical thinking. As her first attempt was unsuccessful, Hao felt more confused about how to demonstrate her critical thinking skills and struggled later because of this. It thus seems valuable to involve students in dialogues where they can share their understandings, concerns, hidden logic, and experiences in displaying critical thinking in academic writing. We should also reexamine current institutional practices embedded in such notions as “academic expectations” or “appropriateness” in higher education so that space is opened up for students’ alternative ways and diverse aspirations in meaning-making. Rather than be left silent, these approaches should be nurtured in a process of interaction, negotiation, and appreciation of difference.

References


