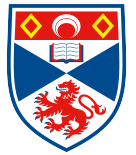


How Chinese Master's Students Develop Their Academic Writing Skills During Their Studies in the UK: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This research focused on Chinese master's students at the University of St Andrews and investigated their academic writing (AW) development during their studies. More specifically, this research aimed to find out students' actual perceptions of academic writing, the possible developments of their perceptions as the year progress, the difficulties they encountered, and the strategies they employed.

Background

For students who had no experience of studying in a higher institution that uses English as the medium of instruction, studying in the UK at master's level can be challenging from the aspect of language: there might be a mismatch with what students think they needed to learn and what they did learn and should have learned but didn't. It is important to investigate into students' actual perceptions and their development, and knowing how students think can inform the support provisions provided by EAP practitioners and universities. However, there is limited published research focusing on students' actual perceptions, and the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic may significantly influence students' development since they need to adjust to the sudden shift of learning mode (from in-person to online). The students were interviewed when they successfully completed their taught courses, and they recalled their experience during this difficult time.

Research Questions

1. What perceptions of academic writing do Chinese master's students in the UK hold after one year of studies?
2. How do Chinese master's students' perceptions of academic writing change as the year progress?
3. What kind of difficulties in academic writing did Chinese master's students encounter during their studies?
4. What kind of strategies in academic writing did Chinese master's students use during their studies?

Methodology

- 6 master's students from different faculties were participated;
- All participants completed their undergraduate studies in China;
- Skype interviews were conducted in July 2020;
- The participants were interviewed in Chinese;
- The transcript was translated into English and analysed in English;
- Thematic Analysis was used as the main method.

Findings

Pre-Perception

- Unclear and confused
- Piece of writing using complex language
- Writing based on large amount of citation
- Direction-oriented

Difficulties

- Language barriers
- Cultural differences
- Personal issues

Post-Perception

- Process of reflection
- Communication with others in the same discipline
- Sharing ideas and results
- Output of academic content
- Scholars write more flexibly

Strategies

- Getting help from others
- Use of learning sources
- Use of technology

- Students did **not** develop a clear idea about AW until they started writing their dissertations;
- Students' initial understandings of AW were similar, but they **developed differently**;
- Students tend to identify their development in AW from different aspects;
- Students use **different standard** to measure the AW skills of themselves and the scholars;
- Some students prefer to learn from peers rather than scholars or EAP practitioners;
- The COVID-19 pandemic have changed students' use of strategies;
- Only students who participated in pre-sessional language course use translation as a strategy.

Conclusion

After one year of study, students define academic writing beyond superficial language features, and their developed perceptions emphasis either disciplinary discourses and genres or the process of expressing beliefs and thinking. Students encountered different types of difficulties, and they combine different strategies to improve their academic writing skills.