# The Concept and Practice of Critical Thinking in Academic Writing: An Investigation of International Students' Perceptions and Writing Experiences

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## Abstract

It is generally considered that evidence of critical thinking, as expressed through argumentation, is central to successful academic writing at Western universities. However, the concept of critical thinking is complex: its nature is difficult to define and students, especially those coming from 'non-Western' backgrounds, are perceived to have difficulty in implementing a critical dimension in their writing. The present study, based on the use of in-depth interviews with three postgraduate students, presents findings on the students' interpretations of critical thinking, the factors which they perceive to affect the implementation of critical thinking, and the perceptions of their development as critical thinkers. The findings show that the students, despite coming from different traditions of discourse, have a fairly comprehensive understanding of critical thinking and willingly engage with it. The findings also reveal that although cultural background plays a role in influencing their writing styles, the students have the capacity to learn and master a new discourse. The problems they encountered were due to uncertainty in demonstrating an argument, insufficient subject knowledge, and problematic issues surrounding the essay genre, such as authorial voice and assessment demands. Implications for university departments and tutors are that they should review their writing instruction and guidelines so as to make the requirements of argument more explicit and easily understandable, and in the long term, to re-evaluate the norms of the traditional essay form to accommodate a wider spectrum of expression.

# Contents

# 1. Introduction

Critical thinking is arguably one of the central requirements and desired outcomes in 'Western' universities. The international student population is expected to adopt the established Western academic discourse in order to meet the requirements of successful writing at university and to be able to claim membership in that community. This means that they are required to show evidence of critical thinking in their academic essays in the form an argument, and by demonstrating related skills such as evaluation and analysis. However, students are either unaware of the importance of argumentation in writing or lack understanding of what is meant by the concept of argument, evaluation and analysis (Jones 2007, Wingate 2011). In a study on the experiences of a group of 'non-traditional' students in higher education, Lillis and Turner (2001) found that a recurring theme is that of student confusion about what is expected from them in terms of academic writing. As Andrews (2003, p. 120) points out, "When there is a mismatch between tutors' and students' expectations, trouble can ensue". The reason for the "trouble" - ie. students' inability to write in the ways the academy requires - has been the focus of much scholarly research and debate. Sections of the literature have focused on the background of international students viewing certain cultures, especially Confucius-heritage cultures, as a barrier to the acquisition of critical and analytical skills (Ramanathan and Kaplan 1996b, Atkinson 1997, Ramanathan and Atkinson 1999). Others, such as Elander et al. (2006) and Jones (2007) have argued that international students may fail to demonstrate critical thinking due to the university not explaining and teaching its discourse practices and conventions explicitly enough.

The above discussions can offer valuable perspectives on the nature and practice of critical thinking in higher education, and will be discussed in more detail in the

review of the literature. However, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the issues and complexities surrounding critical thinking, we need to obtain an 'insider's', or emic perspective. Given the importance of demonstrating a critical approach in writing, it is surprising, as Wingate (2011) points out, that there has not been more research on students' perceptions and experiences of the challenges in implementing critical thinking in academic writing. Through conducting a small-scale qualitative research project I aim to capture significant understandings, concerns and issues of a small group of participants in the context of a postgraduate degree programme at a British university.

The focus of the investigation is on student perceptions and experiences rather than assessing or analyzing their critical thinking skills, or evaluating the success of university instruction of critical thinking. My role as both researcher and fellow student gives me an advantageous 'insider's' vantage point from which to foreground my fellow students' voices which might not otherwise be heard. The aim of the study is to glean some insights into the learning experiences and challenges that international students meet as they adapt to a new academic discourse. By highlighting these particular complexities, I hope to raise awareness amongst the academic staff and offer some suggestions as to better facilitate the students' expression and development of critical thinking in academic writing.

In order to establish a background and a frame of reference for the study, I will review a range of research and theorising about the nature and significance of critical thinking, and the perceived difficulties in implementing it in writing. After discussing the methodological approaches which underline the study, I will present the findings of a small-scale research project. The findings will be examined with reference to their correspondence with those of the existing literature, and will be organised and discussed under key themes which emerged during the data

analysis. There then follows a discussion synthesising the main findings, issues and concerns in answer to the questions the research set out to explore. Finally, the conclusion will bring together the most pertinent insights which emerged from the research and outline some implications for academic departments.

# 2. Literature review

Research on academic composition has increasingly questioned the nature and value of critical thinking in anglophone academic practices, much of it focussing on the challenges which international students face in developing and implementing a critical dimension in their writing (see Zamel 1993, 1995, Fox 1994, Casanave 2004).

In order to provide a relevant context to examine these challenges, I will first explore some of the complexities in understanding the concept of critical thinking and discuss its role in anglophone academic discourse. Next, I will provide an overview of the two main bodies of theory underpinning critical thinking. In the final section, I will review the main difficulties associated with expressing criticality in writing.

## 2.1. The nature of critical thinking

Even though the words 'critical thinking' convey a general idea of what it entails, it remains a concept over which there is much uncertainty and contention about what it encompasses and how it is manifested. This is evident by the numerous ways it is defined.

In broad terms critical thinking is viewed as a cognitive skill related to rational judgement, defined as "the educational cognate of rationality" Siegel (1988 in Jones 2005), "reflexive skepticism" (McPeck 1981) and "critical self-reflection" (Barnett 1997 in Tapper 2004, p. 201).

Toulmin, Rieke and Janik (1984 in Andrews 2000, p.5) associate critical thinking with reasoning, used for "the central activity of presenting reasons in support of a claim." This type of logical argumentation can be taught through syllogisms (Davies

2008), but as Wingate (2011) points out, syllogisms are mostly suitable for single claims, rather than for the large-scale structure of the essay.

When it comes to university contexts, critical thinking is defined in terms of abilities or skills such as selection, evaluation, analysis, reflection, questioning, inference and judgement (Tapper 2004). Despite the many diverging views on the nature of critical thinking, there is consensus in the literature that critical thinking is exhibited through the students' abilities to "identify issues and assumptions, recognise important relationships, make correct inferences, evaluate evidence or authority, and deduce conclusions" (Tsui 2002, p.743).

When critical thinking is applied to writing, the above abilities are expressed through the process of argumentation, producing an argument i.e. the essay, the dissertation. Argument can be defined as a connected series of related ideas "intended to establish a position and implying response to another (or more than one) position" (Andrews 1995, p.3). Argument is regarded as the primary expression of critical thinking in higher education (Andrews 1995, Scott 2000), and the defining feature of the essay (Elander et al. 2006). As Bonnett (2001, pp.50-51) emphasizes: "Your essay is your argument, everything else makes sense because of it".

Despite the importance of presenting an argument in academic writing, students still lack an understanding of its implementation or labour under misconceptions. Elander et al. (2006) point out that in a previous study the majority of the students felt that argumentation means presenting their own original views or opinions. As Branthwaite et al. (1980) point out, the need for 'original' thought is more likely to be emphasized by students as it is by tutors, who generally do not regard

'originality' as a key criterion of successful academic writing.  Another popular misconception is that argumentation is manifested solely through an adversarial stance in writing, by overtly criticising scholars' research or claims. However, as Andrews (1995) explains, an argument should be sensitive to, and engage with other points of view: evaluating, rather than criticising the sources, and incorporating those claims which are closest to their own position.

Adding to the confusion around the concept of argumentation is the tutors' own uncertainty in articulating what a well-developed argument entails. Mitchell et al. (2008) report that when interviewing university tutors, they used non-specific descriptions and vague terms such as *critique, critical analysis*, and *opinion* as terms of explanation. Furthermore, Mitchell and Riddle's study (2000 in Wingate 2011) shows that there is a general lack of clarity in feedback comments on student essays, the markers using both the singular and plural forms of the term 'argument' interchangeably, thereby not making it clear that it is the development of an over-arching position (i.e. an argument), rather than individual claims (i.e. arguments) which produces a successful essay.

What is therefore needed from a pedagogical perspective is not only a definition of critical thinking or argument, but descriptions of core characteristics of essays which demonstrate critical thinking. In this regard I turn to Wingate's (2011) three components of argumentation, a three-step description of developing an argument. It is useful in presenting a clear and easily understood set of abilities student writers need in order to write effective argumentative essays. The first component is "analysis and evaluation of content knowledge" (p.2). This relates to the ability of selecting relevant information from the literature to substantiate the writer's argument. The second component is "the writer's development of a

position", i.e. argument (p.2). The writer needs to present a considered position, usually established through the writer's 'voice', or stance. The third component is "the presentation of the writer's position in a coherent manner" (p.3). This pertains to the logical arrangement of propositions at the structural level, usually presented through the default academic genre of the essay or dissertation.

The difficulties which students may experience with these three components of developing an argument will be examined further on.

As is evident from the above definitions and descriptions, critical thinking is a concept with a wide breadth, encapsulating both a social activity and a cognitive operation. It reveals itself in an essay through argumentation, the process by which a text transforms other texts, thereby not merely reproducing knowledge, but reconstructing knowledge.

## 2.2. The significance of critical thinking in higher education

Critical thinking is regarded as a highly valued outcome of tertiary education. Outside of university study, employers seek graduate employees who are able to transfer their critical thinking abilities to the workplace (Tapper 2004). Other scholars such as Elander et al. (2006) believe that critical thinking skills are not merely transferable to other areas of our lives, but also personally transformative, inducing individuals to develop from passive recipients of knowledge to active, participants in society.

However, one has to bear in mind that those international students who come from cultures where critical thinking is not encouraged or appreciated, might find it neither helpful nor advisable to adopt a critical thinking approach outside of their academic pursuits.

Andrews and Mitchell (2001) and Lillis (2001) maintain that argument assists in the learning process, enhancing and consolidating students' understanding of a subject. By encouraging students to argue and to question, both in spoken and written form, they are given a sense of control over their own learning, which leads to increased confidence and autonomy. Broadly, argument provides a means to circumscribe and assess the knowledge which is produced within the academy, and more specifically, a way for tutors to gage their students' understanding of the subject matter.

However, it is not enough for students to know that critical thinking is a key criterion of a high-scoring essay, they should also know why and how critical thinking is useful to their general development as a student. In this way, the student is not just blindly adopting the academic conventions of a Western university, but is consciously employing the critical thinking tools they are offered to gain most benefit from their studies.

Although there is much agreement on the significance of critical thinking, its general relevance and applicability is a question which has engendered much debate. In the following section I investigate this debate in more detail.

## 2.3. The theoretical constructs of critical thinking

Since Kaplan's study (1966), comparing thought patterns between different cultures, there has been some evidence in subsequent research that cultural differences in approaches to thinking and learning styles do exist. This cross-cultural comparison formed the basis of what came to be known as contrastive

rhetoric (CR), a discipline which maintains that "different language communities represent different cultures and literacy practices" (Canagarajah 2002).

The research identifies critical thinking as a prime distinguishing feature between Anglo-American academic models and 'non-mainstream', or Confucian-based learning systems (Cadman 2000, Egege and Kutieleh 2004). According to this finding, students from Asian countries or 'Confucian-heritage cultures (CHC) such as China, Vietnam, Korea, Singapore and Japan avoid a critical approach to academic texts and are considered to lack an awareness of what is involved in critical analysis and reflection (Biggs 1987, 1994, Ballard and Clanchy 1991). The non-criticality of these cultures has largely been attributed to their educational system based on rote-learning, and their deference to teachers and scholars, where any critique can be construed as being impolite and disrespectful (Andrews 2007).

This cultural construct of critical thinking has engendered much debate amongst scholars as to the pedagogical implications of critical thinking: firstly, to what extent does a particular culture support or inhibit critical thinking, and secondly, whether it is possible and appropriate to teach critical thinking skills to individuals from so-called non-critical communities. The main arguments can roughly be divided into two opposing constructs: one presents critical thinking as a universally essential skill, the other views it as specific to Western culture.

The first construct conceives of critical thinking in broad terms, characterizing it as "a basic human survival mechanism", applied by all societies, some to a greater degree than others (Casanave 2004, p.206). Those who promote this construct are of the view that the ability to think critically is not only central to a good education, but also integral to engaging with the world as a reflective and active citizen

(Moore 2004). This widely-held perspective is exemplified by the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking Instruction (2003) who states that:

> In its exemplary form [critical thinking] is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject-matter divisions; clarity accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth and fairness.

Critical thinking is thus conceived as a self-evidently useful skill, one which is desirable, beneficial and achievable, and most importantly, universally valued. Pertaining to its pedagogical applicability, Angelo and Cross (1993 in Egege and Kutieleh 2004, p.79), advocate that the ability to think critically is the prime goal of the liberal arts and general education, and should be applied to "virtually all methods of inquiry practiced in the academic disciplines".

The assumption that critical thinking is a neutral, universally valued skill is however, problematic. As Egege and Kutieleh (2004) observe, the cognitive capacity to reason is something which all human beings are considered to possess. Nevertheless, this does not mean that good reasoning and analytical skills are embraced by all cultures and valued in the same way. And moreover, even if one takes the view that reasoning skills are universally appreciated, the evidence of such reasoning skills is not universal. What counts as critical thinking in the West - the techniques of analysis and evaluation, the style and linear structure of the written argument – is in fact part of a Western cultural tradition originating from the ancient Greeks.

In teaching non-mainstream students, it is thus important to acknowledge that critical thinking as it is practiced in the West is not universal, but should rather be seen in the context of the historical, political and social conditions in which it is embedded.

The second construct of critical thinking is a critique on precisely this notion of a neutral, universally desired skill. In contrast, it presents critical thinking as a culturally-specific, uniquely Western concept, an ability which people develop unconsciously as they are socialized in their Anglophone cultures. The scholars who advocate this approach question whether it is appropriate to impose critical thinking pedagogies on L2 learners who come from a different culture (Atkinson and Ramanathan 1995, Ramanathan and Kaplan 1996a, 1996b, Atkinson 1997).

Atkinson's (1997) argument is based on 4 premises: firstly, he characterises critical thinking as a tacit social practice, which the individual learns intuitively, "through the pores" (p. 73), by virtue of growing up in a Western culture. It is therefore difficult to pinpoint and define, and not easy, if at all possible, to teach. Second, Atkinson argues that critical thinking is "exclusive and reductive" (p.77). Far from being a universally applicable skill, it reduces useful thinking skills to (in)formal logic, thereby excluding and marginalizing many groups, including women who may not be comfortable with its "masculinist", adversarial nature (p. 78). Third, he stresses that teaching critical thinking to people from non-Western societies may be fraught with problems, due to the fact that the related notions of individualism and self-expression are alien to non-Western writers. He concludes with his fourth assumption, namely that critical thinking skills, once taught, do not appear to be transferable to contexts outside the learning environment.

In a study undertaken by Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996b), they analyse L1 composition textbooks, noting that the textbooks emphasize informal logic, and promote the use of concepts like voice, argumentation and critical thinking. They conclude that these texts are therefore not suitable for L2 student writers, stating that L2 writers would have difficulty with the critical thinking tasks which require

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analyses and reflection- skills which did not form part of their socialization or education:

> L2 student-writers […] are more likely than native English speaking students to encounter difficulty when inducted into critical thinking courses in freshman composition classes. They are not "ready" for critical thinking courses in either L1 or L2 writing courses (p. 232).

This would imply that Ramanathan and Kaplan view the non-mainstream culture of the L2 student writers as a barrier to the acquisition of critical and analytical skills.

The above arguments are in line with the contrastive rhetoric approach and the related studies have produced some useful findings on the differences in writing practices between non-native and anglophone communities (see Ramanathan and Kaplan 1996b). CR takes into account the students' linguistic and cultural milieu, making teachers aware and giving them an insight into the challenges which L2 students face with language and writing. This relativist approach avoids thinking of academic practices as neutral constructs to be adopted by everyone in every context. Rather, it takes the students' culture seriously and is more tolerant and understanding towards different writing conventions or rhetorical deviations (see Fox 1994).

The popularity of approaches like CR points to the fact that educators pay great attention to differences in academic writing practices. However, as Casanave (2004) points out, there has also been a lot of critique in the literature against the condescending portrayal of L2 writers as "not ready" or having difficulty in thinking critically in either L1 or L2 (Ramanathan and Kaplan 1996b). L2 specialists have taken issue with the cultural and linguistic determinism underlying the arguments of scholars such as Atkinson, Kaplan and Ramanathan. Zamel (1997) and Canagarajah (2002a) do not agree that students' cultural and linguistic background

should be viewed as making them less capable of critical thought or analysis, and preventing them from becoming successful writers in English. Instead of being bound by their languages and cultures, Canagarajah ( 2002b, p.101) argues that "everyone has agency to rise above their culture and social conditions to attain critical insights into their human condition". Zamel (1997) and Davidson (1998) take further issue with a perspective which cautions teachers against imposing Western analytical skills of critique and reasoning on students who come from communities which do not practice these skills. Davidson (1998) argues that it is the teacher's responsibility to prepare learners for meeting the demands of academic writing at university, and if the university expects critical thinking skills to be displayed, then they need to be made explicit and taught.

Another criticism against this approach is its static and homogenous perception of culture in general, and the L2 writer in particular. Canagarajah (2002a, p.35) argues that one should not overlook "the considerable hybridity and heterogeneity evident in each community". He goes on to explain that globalization has resulted in spreading Anglo-American values and institutions to other communities. In addition, people are moving between different communities and have multiple memberships, and thus it is impossible to pinpoint their diverse cultural and linguistic traits to one immutable set of values. Therefore the cultures of different communities cannot be treated as separate and uniform.

The same conclusion is reached with regards to writing practices, specifically focusing on Chinese rhetoric. Current studies have suggested that modern Chinese academic writing is not monolithic or diametrically opposed to Western writing, but in fact shows some similarities in structure to that of Western texts (Kirkpatrick 1997, Jones 2005). This suggests that there is notable interchange between Western and Chinese academic practices. Canagarajah (2002b, p.64) makes a

particularly salient point when he observes that even though students may prefer certain practices of text construction based on their own traditions, they can still "creatively negotiate" the dominant Western practices they are introduced to.

In review of this debate, it is important to make clear that neither approach suggests that there are no differences between anglophone and non-Western cultures as pertains to academic practices. There is general consensus that students will face and even resist unfamiliar writing norms in new educational contexts (Zamel 1997). Canagarajah (2002b, p. 68) draws attention to the proposition that "The more important consideration in critical writing is not difference per se but the attitudes we adopt toward difference". We need to avoid treating the rhetorical differences of international students as a deficit in a Western academic environment.

That brings me to the next section in which I address some of the factors which have been identified in the literature as potentially being problematic for both mainstream and international students in implementing a critical dimension in their writing.

## 2.4. Difficulties in expressing criticality in academic writing

There is little controversy about the importance of academic writing in higher education. It is regarded as the means for students to explore and consolidate their understanding of the subject knowledge, as well as a way for tutors to gage their students' understanding and engagement with the subject. However, as Lillis (2001) remarks, student writing is increasingly serving the purpose of gate keeping. Students, especially at postgraduate level, are in most cases assessed solely on their writing, either passing or failing courses according to how they respond to the writing tasks.

This holds serious implications for both L1 and L2 writers, but especially for L2 international students who may well not be familiar with the criteria of Western academic discourses.

Since the presentation of an argument is a key criterion of successful writing at higher education, I will look at the three components of developing an argument as identified in chapter 2.1, and the difficulties associated with implementing each component.

Firstly, I examine the problem of insufficient subject knowledge, since it directly affects the ability of students to analyse and evaluate content knowledge (the first component of argumentation). Next I discuss the difficulties which students have with manifesting their presence, or authoritative 'voice' in writing, essential in establishing a position (the second component). I go on to look at the complexities of developing and presenting an argument (the third component), within the structure of the essay form. I critically examine the essay genre, looking at the challenges this textual form presents to students and to what extent it supports or inhibits the expression of an argument.

## 2.4.1. Subject knowledge

Sufficient subject knowledge has been regarded as an essential requirement for the development of critical thinking skills. It can be seen as the fertile soil on which the seed of critical thinking can take root and grow. As Garside (1996, p.215) points out, "Since it is impossible to think critically about something of which one knows nothing, critical thinking is dependent on a sufficient base of knowledge".

In discussing the challenges which both L1 and L2 writers face, some scholars have identified lack of subject knowledge as one of the key impediments to developing an argument in writing (Andrews 1995, Wingate 2011). In the Confucian-heritage

tradition, students first need to acquire sufficient subject knowledge before they can attempt to develop their own position within their field (Andrews 2007). Acquiring subject knowledge is therefore the crucial initial step in developing a critical dimension in their writing.

McPeck (1990) states that the critical thinking skills such as analysing the literature, identifying relevant information, and evaluating claims, is only possible if the person has sufficient knowledge of the particular subject area in question. According to McPeck, critical thinking is contingent on "substantive knowledge", not the general knowledge of formal and informal logic. Leading on from that view, is the commonly held premise that critical thinking skills are more effectively developed when integrated with subject knowledge, than when taught generically through separate study skills programmes, solely focusing on critical thinking (McPeck 1990, Garside 1996, Moore 2004). This view is supported by findings from various studies conducted on the promotion of critical thinking in education. In one qualitative evaluation of nursing education, it was found that significantly more gains were obtained by incorporating critical thinking into the students' clinical practice and academic learning, than by the study skills programme (Girot 1995 in Elander et al. 2006).

Since argumentation in the essay genre is highly discipline-specific (Mitchell and Riddle 2000), informed critical thinking should therefore form part of every academic subject and practice. In such a way, the student's subject knowledge and critical thinking skills can develop symbiotically.

## 2.4.2. Authorial voice

'Voice' as is manifested in writing can be summarised as the writer's distinctive presence, "the strength with which the writer comes over as the author of the text"

(Ivanic 2005, p.400). The manifestation of an authorial 'voice' is regarded as a significant component of successful English academic writing but is rarely made explicit to students (Street 2009, Wingate 2011).

There remains a common perception among both L1 and L2 students that academic writing is an impersonal discourse devoid of the author's presence. This belief could be due to the writing guides and textbooks, as well as teachers, who commonly advise students against explicitly presenting themselves in their writing, and to avoid the use of the first person pronoun (Hyland 2002b). In contrast to this view, Hyland's study (2002a) clearly demonstrates that disciplines such as humanities and social sciences do not require a construct of impersonality. In fact, several scholars have encouraged the use of the first person pronoun in academic writing as a powerful rhetorical option, assisting writers to commit to their claims (Ivanic 1998).

The difficulties related to establishing an authorial voice in academic writing has been widely discussed in the literature (Ivanic 1998, Lillis 2001, Hyland 2002a). Groom (2000) identifies three common patterns of difficulty. The first, called 'solipsistic voice' refers to statements which present the writer's own views without making reference to the sources. The reason for this, Groom suggests, might be that the writer is not aware of the requirement of using sources to back up his/her claims. The second, the 'unaverred voice', refers to students who rephrase various authors' views without asserting their own position. This could be due to a lack of confidence in positioning their view in relation to established authors. The third pattern, namely the 'unattributed voice', pertains to the situation where the writer presents ideas as if it were their own, when in fact it is from another source.

Another factor to take into consideration, is that students who are new to Western academic literacy may have substantial difficulty in constructing a "workable balance"

(Groom 2000, p.65) between the student writer's own voice and the voices of other, more established authors. Such students, especially those from Confucian-heritage cultures may be prone to adopt the unaverred voice, in so doing, demonstrating deference to the author and his/her views – a practice which is valued in their own writing tradition. Furthermore, international students may refrain from using "I" due to its association with an assertive, individual identity, when their own writing culture prefers a suggestive and collective identity.

As with the concept of critical thinking, I think it is important for educators to explicitly inform students about the importance of an authorial voice in their writing, to explain the different stylistic devices associated with presenting a voice, and to explain how a balance can be achieved between expressing their own voice and that of other authors. Importantly, students should be made aware that these academic conventions are part of a specific, not universal culture, and that they are not immutable, but open to negotiation.

### 2.4.3. The essay genre

In higher education, students need to do more than acquire and reproduce knowledge; they need to transform, to recreate knowledge, by using the rhetorical tool of argument. This 'transformed knowledge' or 'argument' should then be organised into a structured whole, linking the different components in a logical manner (Elander et al. 2006). The structured argument is displayed through the medium of the essay, which together with the thesis or dissertation, are the default genres of post-graduate study in the arts, humanities and social sciences (Andrews 2007).

The essay form is the main rhetorical form which students encounter, and thus I would like to explore it in more detail. It is bound by the conventions of Western rhetoric, by a rigid, canonical structure, and by assessment demands. The normative nature of the essay genre, dictating how students should express themselves, can be frustrating for the student (Andrews and Mitchell 2001). Moreover, despite its central status in academic disciplines, the essay is not a clearly defined genre (Lillis 2001). Andrews (2003) suggests that the prominence of the essay in the academy might be a subtle form of 'gate keeping' in that the requirements of a successful essay are not sufficiently spelt out. Even where there are guidelines on 'what makes a good essay', there can be a preoccupation with surface form, or unclear terms employed, such as *evaluate, discuss,* or *structure* without a specific explanation of what each entails. This uncertainty as to what educators mean by 'essay', and what students understand by it, can result in students' writing not fulfilling the requirements of the genre.

The key requirement for a successful essay is that it demonstrates argumentation as opposed to mere description (Andrews and Mitchell 2001). When students fail to produce an argued essay, it is not necessarily due to cultural interference, but as Andrews (2007) argues, because they did not fully understand the framework of the essay genre which they have to operate within. It is therefore imperative that the purpose and rhetorical conventions of the essay-genre are made clear to students.

One should however, not discount the factor that some students coming from a Confusion heritage culture may find it challenging and even inappropriate to critically evaluate scholars' arguments in an explicit way. As Wu and Rubin (1999) explain, the Confusion–heritage tradition largely prefers compromise to argument and values a display of deference to traditional scholars and their views. Granting

that culture can be an influence on writing styles, it should however, not be seen as a barrier to developing an argument in writing.

Another challenge of the essay form is the difficulty of bringing together multiple points of view from different sources and presenting them in a single voice, in accordance with the monologic form of the essay (Andrews 2007). This can lead students to enumerating different viewpoints in an explicatory manner, instead of presenting their own unified position in an adversarial structure. Such a position requires a certain sense of power and control over the text, as Andrews (2007, p.11) states: "To be critical is to take on a powerful position". Many international students might feel they lack this power to be able to develop a position, or an authoritative 'voice' in a foreign critical discourse at university. This concept of an individualised voice will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Focussing on students' perceptions of the essay and its embedded argument, Woods (2000) observes that students do not perceive of the essay as conducive to discursive exploration:

> They do not regard an essay as a site that enables the writer to walk the fine line between the subjective and objective, between the personal and the public, and, in a dialogic and often playful manner, to reveal his/her thinking for the reader's pleasure if not instruction (p.98).

In addressing this issue, Andrews (2003) proposes some possible alternatives to the conventional essay format. He holds up four essays, chosen from the work of his own students, as examples: first, the Socratic dialogue, using the device of question and answer between the author and an implied interlocutor. Andrews points out that the use of two or more voices in such a dialogic form is more explicit and

better suited for expressing critical thinking than in an essay where the voices are distilled into a single authorial voice.

Second, Andrews presents the reflective critical autobiography. This entails a combination of personal reflection and critical exploration of an idea. Andrews mentions the essays of Francis Bacon and Michel de Montaigne to illustrate this genre's traditional roots, and current publications such as the *London Review of Books*, and *The Spectator* where this type of personal, authoritative essay is common.

The third example is the essay written in the metaphorical mode. Andrews describes a student's essay which was not only well-structured and argued, but also used the device of a gardening metaphor weaved within the essay to give extra dimension to the topic of multilingualism.

Finally he discusses a doctoral thesis, which although it was bound in the conventional way, did not look like a thesis. This experimental "*Tristram Shandy*-like work" (p.125) consisted of a collection of poetry, sections of narrative, highly figurative writing, in addition to more conventional argumentative text.

Andrews provides these examples of counter texts as a way to invite and encourage students to experiment with the form and style in which they present their argument.

In this way, the cultural capital of academic writing can be made available to a wider spectrum of students, allowing both international and mainstream student writers to find the appropriate form of expression for their argument, without being restricted unnecessarily by the prescriptions of a dominant culture's discourse practices.

From this overview of the literature, it can be seen that critical thinking is a complex concept which features prominently in educational debates. In terms of its theoretical constructs it is characterized as either a universally essential skill or a social practice specific to Western culture. As regards its manifestation in writing, the literature review has identified a range of difficulties experienced by student writers, especially international students. The focus of my research will thus be on international students, and what follows is an explanation of the methodology which underpins my study into their perceptions and experiences of critical thinking in academic discourse.

# 3. Methodology

Broadly speaking my research was guided by the following questions:

1) What perceptions do international students hold of academic writing in general and critical thinking in particular?

2) Which problems do international students encounter with expressing criticality in English academic essays? How does their cultural background influence their writing?

3) How do international students perceive their development in academic writing and critical thinking skills during their year of post-graduate study?

## 3.1. Rationale for research methods used

Through this study I hope to develop insights into the writing experiences of post-graduate international students studying at a UK university, specifically examining how they understand and engage with the concept of critical thinking. This type of emic perspective on international students' experiences is best achieved through the use of a qualitative research method involving in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

As Briggs (1986) states, interviews are arguably the most commonly used instrument in qualitative research. Interviews are used in order to access the feelings, thoughts and intentions of others, their 'inner-world', that which cannot be directly observed or measured.

The advantage of interviews is that they provide detailed, rich insights, which surveys, observations or most casual conversations cannot capture to the same in-depth level (Forsey 2012). Unlike highly-structured survey interviews, the interviewee in a semi-structured interview is more "a participant in meaning

making than a conduit from which information is retrieved" (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006, p314). Taking into regard my position as a peer, this 'participatory approach' was an important determinant for me when deciding on my research methods.

Another consideration was whether to use focus group interviews or one-to-one interviews. Although group interviews provide researchers access to a wider range of experience (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006), I decided against using such a method, as the public nature of the process could inhibit and discomfit some interviewees. Given the potential sensitivities in discussing one's own writing, it could potentially cause students to lose 'face' in front of others.

Furthermore, interviews enable the use of open-ended questions and probing, methods which encourage the interviewees "to find and speak in their own 'voices' " Mishler (1986 p.118) and which enable the researcher to explore the interviewees initial answer. This probing technique is essential in investigating the complicated concept of critical thinking and argument and to unpack the interviewees understanding of it.


## 3.2. Participants

The participants consisted of three female students enrolled in the MA English language teaching and Applied Linguistics at King's College in London, UK. Rui and An are both from China and Harika is from Turkey. All three came across as confident students in class, frequently voicing their views and asking questions. Of the three Rui was the 'weaker' student. She sometimes struggled to make herself understood in class, mainly due to her strong Chinese accent affecting intelligibility, as well as inaccuracies in grammar structures and word choice. She also had the most difficulty with writing and did not have any prior experience of

writing academic essays in English. After failing her first essay, she's shown steady improvement and her subsequent essays have all received a grade C.

An, although also Chinese, differed in many respects to Rui. A very confident and proficient speaker of English, An also had experience in writing English academic essays in China before coming to the UK. Her essay marks reflected her competence in academic writing, generally receiving grade B or B+.

Harika, from Turkey was a very confident and expressive student in class, not shy to voice her opinion or show if she did not agree with a particular point. Her essay marks ranged between grade C and B+; this vacillation was a source of frustration for her.


## 3.3. Recruitment of participants and ethical issues

The participants of the study were selected from among students enrolled on the MA ELT and Applied Linguistics full-time programme at King's College London (KCL). Information about the study was disseminated through emails in May 2012, and a final selection was made one month later. The parameters for selection included no previous experience of an anglophone university and coming from a non-English speaking country. Since critical thinking is seen as a cultural construct associated with Western, anglophone academia, I sought participants from outside that cultural milieu, so as to investigate how they engaged with and adapted to writing conventions at a British university.

In adherence to KCL's research ethics guidelines, approval to conduct research was applied for and granted by the Humanities Research Ethics Panel, prior to collecting the data. The study followed the guidelines as set out by KCL's Research Ethics Guidelines and inline with BAAL. In accordance with Confidentiality and Anonymity,

the names of the participants are fictional. All participants were sent an information sheet describing the nature, purpose and procedures of the research. They signed a consent form informing them of their rights, including their right to withdraw from the study at any time until August 3, 2012 without giving a reason. They were also offered the opportunity to review transcripts of their interviews. The recordings, transcripts and participants' essays were stored securely and recordings were destroyed after data was transcribed and analysed.

## 3.4. Data collection and analysis

### 3.4.1. The interview process

The participants were interviewed individually using a semi-structured protocol. The interviews were conducted during July 2012, after the end of the academic year, meaning that the students had written and received back 5 assignments to reflect on. The interviews were scheduled in advance, lasted approximately 30 minutes each and all were recorded and transcribed verbatim. An and Harika were interviewed once, and Rui was interviewed twice, both interviews lasting approximately 30minutes. I felt the need for a second interview as the first one could be seen as a 'test run'. After listening to the first interview, I realised that I needed to give more time to the interviewee to talk uninterrupted and let her bring up the issues she wanted to talk about, instead of my research goals steering the interview. I retained the first interview as data as it included some noteworthy findings.

The interviews were organised around a topic guide (see Appendix), providing a framework of orientation and making possible comparisons of interviews easier.

The questions were structured to cover the general to the specific. Starting from a general background discussion about prior writing experience and general perceptions of academic writing, the interview progressed to a more practical focus on interviewees' current writing and any difficulties involved with presenting an argument. I was interested if the writing conventions from their own culture (especially Confusion-heritage culture) had any impact on the expression of criticality in English academic writing, as was debated in the literature. I therefore included questions inviting them to reflect on this issue. I ended the interview by asking if they had any suggestions to improve the instruction of academic writing in general and criticality in particular.

In order to mitigate the effects of "social desirability bias", I adopted an "empathetic" approach during the study (Dornyei 2007), encouraging participants to share their views openly. This approach came naturally since I was a fellow student, enrolled in the same programme, and therefore I had established a very good rapport with the group of students including the three participants.

### 3.4.2. The transcription process

In accordance with qualitative research methods, analytic induction (Goetz and LeCompte 1984) was used to analyse the transcripts of the interviews. As prescribed by this approach, I read and reread the transcripts, searching for salient or recurring themes. In the next stage, I grouped the themes under headings which emerged from the data. Some of these headings were similar to those of the topic guide. In this way the load of data is managed, permitting categories to be analysed and compared. I selected extracts from the transcripts for inclusion in the 'Findings and Discussion' section on the basis that they best demonstrated an identified theme. The participants' perceptions I wished to foreground were chosen not so

much on the basis of their recurring frequency but rather on their poignant expression of ideas and understandings.

## 3.5. Research design: strengths and limitations

It could be argued that my role as both researcher and fellow student compromised my capacity to remain objective. However, it could also be argued, as Oakley (1981 in Forsey 2012, p.366) does, that

> "…in most cases the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship"

Therefore being on familiar terms with the participants was perhaps more an advantageous than a detrimental factor, alleviating some of the awkwardness and contributing to a more natural environment. Thus, my in-group status might also have played a role in overcoming the predicament known as the 'observer's paradox'[1] (Labov 1972).

When conducting qualitative research the question of internal and external validity needs to be addressed (Campbell and Stanley 1963 in Dornyei 2007). Given the small scale nature of this study, the extent to which the findings can be compared and generalised is questionable, thereby decreasing its external validity.

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[1] A term referring to the dilemma where the researcher's presence undermines the natural milieu they seek to research.

The decision to interview the students individually and adopt an empathetic interview style enhanced the internal validity of the study, in that it acknowledged the sensitivities involved in talking about academic related difficulties.

# 4. Findings and discussion

This study was designed to investigate the perceptions and insights into the writing experiences of post-graduate international students studying at a UK university, specifically examining how they understand and engage with the concept of critical thinking. Extracts of the interviews with three postgraduate students are presented below under themes which emerged during data analysis. These themes are also loosely structured around the three core questions which underpin this study.

## 4.1 Academic writing: participants' interpretations of requirements

I was interested in finding out whether the participants would mention critical thinking or argument without being prompted, and thus I asked a generic question about their thoughts on the key components of a good assignment. What is striking about their answers is not only what was mentioned, but the way in which it was mentioned.

Rai (from China) had a very pragmatic approach and systematically listed off the academic writing requirements and their function like listing the ingredients and instructions to a recipe. While doing so, she took a pen and paper and wrote and numbered each feature as she spoke, further emphasising this 'listing' approach. The requirements she mentioned are similar to those that Lea and Street (1998) identify in their study investigating student and staff perceptions of academic writing in higher education.

Structure was number one on her list of key components: *"If your structure is very clear, your reader, the tutor, is very easy for them to understand what I'm writing"*. Argument was mentioned next (I will discuss her perceptions of argument in more detail under the next theme) and lastly writing style, by which she meant using formal, academic language.

In listing and explaining the components of academic writing, Rai spoke in an instructional mode, without hesitation or expressing uncertainty:

> *In your assignment, first thing you will do...*
> *After you read [...] you will make a decision [...]*
> *Then you will make the question [...]*
> *You should choose academic words.*

I was interested to know her feelings or thoughts on the requirements of academic writing, and after probing more, she divulged that at the beginning she found it difficult to structure her paper and organise her thoughts. Subsequently, however, presenting an argument became the *"most important and hardest".* The fact that Rai highlights argument as being both a significant and challenging concept to implement should be noted, and will be discussed below.


An, like Rai, is Chinese, but unlike Rai has had previous experience in English academic writing whilst she was an undergraduate student in China.
An has a more neutral, detached approach than Rai when talking about the requirements of academic writing. She talks about the requirements as an external set of norms, imparted by  the lecturers ('they') to be carried out by the students ('we'):

> *I remember one of our lecturers mentioned [...] we should bear our audience in mind and the priority for us should be to show the audience, or show our lecturer, our supervisor that we have a clear idea of the topic we're writing about.*

Furthermore, she explains, lecturers also expect students to show "*criticism*" and their "*own thinking*" as part of effective academic writing. An uses the word "criticism" when referring to critical thinking, and this will be explored in more detail below.

Harika, the Turkish student, takes yet another approach in talking about academic writing, in that she problematises the requirements.
When asked what she thinks are the key components of a good essay, she remarked that she was still not sure, even at the end of the academic year. She explained that what constitutes a good essay all depends on the person who evaluates it. When probed for more detail, she singled out structure as being important '*for them*':

> *Most of the time I realise rather than focussing on the content of the paper, for them structure is more important.*

To illustrate that the structure, "*the appearance of a paper*", is more important than the content, she used an interesting metaphor, that of a woman who is judged on her clothes, her appearance, rather than her personality or what she thinks.

As can be noted from the quotation above, like An, she also refers to the features of successful writing as norms coming from 'them' i.e. her lecturers, not from her personal conviction.

Looking at their answers, both the similarities and differences are revealing. Focussing on the similarities, it is notable that all three participants mention that they view their lecturer/supervisor/tutor/ "*the person who evaluates*" (Harika), as the reader they have in mind while writing their essay. This means they are writing for someone who is either an expert on the field, or who will evaluate their writing,

rather than their fellow classmates, colleagues or the interested public. Harika goes as far as to imply that the criteria of what constitutes a good essay depends on "*the person who evaluates*" it, implying that each marker has their own idea of what a good essay entails.

As already pointed out, both An and Harika talk about academic writing in terms which imply that they are norms promoted by their lecturers, to be implemented by the students. It remains unclear whether they wholeheartedly agree with and embrace the features they mentioned as constituting good writing practice. Rai, in contrast, seems to have fully assimilated, if not mastered, the requirements of Western academic writing, expressing no ambivalence as she lists them off, but instead seems empowered by her knowledge of a new academic discourse.

The above findings could lend support to Cadman's (2000) study of a group of international postgraduate students at an Australian university. In the study the students are all aware what was expected of them with regards to adapting or changing their approach to academic writing, some valuing and appropriating the different academic conventions more than others. Lastly, it is evident that all three participants emphasised the importance of argument and critical thinking in academic writing. Rai and An listed it as one of their key components of a good essay, and Harika mentioned it subsequently in talking about what she thought was expected from her when writing her first essay.

## 4.2. Critical thinking: complexities and difficulties in implementation

As mentioned above, it is apparent that the participants had a clear sense of the need to show evidence of critical thinking in their academic writing. However, when asked specifically on their understanding of critical thinking and its implementation, the participants revealed their uncertainty about what it entails and imparted the complexities involved in attempting to express their critical voice.

### 4.2.1. Lack of certainty in understanding critical thinking

An:
*Actually at the beginning I had a little confusion, and I still don't know if I understand this term correctly, even now. Because even if the lecturers have told us what critical should be, but I still don't feel I'm confident I can show critical thinking in my own assignments. Like I mentioned, 'critical', 'criticise', we tend to believe that if students want to be critical, they should oppose those famous writers' views. But, in fact it's not the case, right? We can also show our agreement with these authors and emphasise the points we are interested in, and also what has the same kind of implication in our contexts. Right?*

Harika:
*[...] you should be critical, but I don't know exactly what critical was. Probably what I thought was they were expecting us to critically analyse the theories and find positive and negative parts of it, and also add your own comments. But I still of course don't know, is this what they expect of me. And the feedback also didn't show me any direction. What I do is what I think...but whether my interpretation is right or wrong I still don't know and I'm still doing it in my own way.*

From these responses it is apparent that Rai and Harika were aware of the perceived requirement to be critical, but were uncertain about how this was achieved and if they had achieved this successfully in their assignment. This is a

common sentiment amongst not only international students but also native speakers, and reported in various studies as mentioned in the literature (see Lea and Street 1998, Elander et al 2006).

Both participants mention confusion and lack of certainty in understanding critical thinking. As An remarks, the uncertainty is not due to the lecturers not informing students about implementing argument in their writing, but could be as Wingate (2011) argues, that they are not explicitly shown what this concept means and looks like in a real text. This lack of certainty can lead to a lack of confidence, as revealed by An. An also brings up the popular misconception, as was mentioned earlier in this paper, that the related words of *"critical"* and *"criticise"* could make students think that they have to *"oppose"* established authors.

Despite both participants giving an accurate interpretation of what criticality in writing entails, they still express doubt whether they have interpreted or implemented it correctly. An's uncertainty comes through in the interview as she seems to seek reassurance that she has the correct understanding, by adding the question tag *"right*?" at the end of her statements. Harika expresses that she simply follows her *"own way"* in the absence of specific benchmarks and lack of clear guidance from feedback comments.

## 4.2.2. Lack of sufficient subject knowledge

In terms of implementing a critical stance or argument in their writing, it is significant that all three participants stressed the importance of subject knowledge. Let us look firstly at Rai's comments:

> *I didn't show my creative thinking or argument because I'm not confidence in this area. This is main problem. I think if you have got a lot of knowledge of this area, it's very easy […] you can say this way or another way, two way, from different way. So when you are not confidence in this area you may try easily trust big men's voice and forget your own voice.*

Rai identifies lack of knowledge as being the reason for her lack of confidence in expressing her voice in her writing, i.e. an argument. She points out that the requirement to present different viewpoints in an essay is also contingent on subject knowledge. Ironically it could be this very emphasis on acquiring sufficient information or knowledge that was a barrier in developing her voice in the first place. As Andrews (2007) argues, Confucius-heritage cultures place great importance on knowledge, and novice writers avoid presenting their own position before having mastered their field. When preparing for her first essay, Rai's response was to rely on her previous experience as a student in China by reading a lot of books and consulting various authors on the subject area. However, she acknowledges that by doing so "*you may try easily trust big men's voice and forget your own voice"*. The difference in expectations between Chinese and UK academic communities is conveyed in the following comment, as she reflects back on the time when she found out she had failed her first essay:

> *After I get this feedback I am very, you know disappointed, because I think I read a lot.  But at the end of this essay, I didn't show my argument.*

As Rai continues to explain, this first assignment proved to be a turning point for her. She realised that in order to succeed and meet the expectations of academic writing at a British university she could not merely rely on books and "*big men's voice*" but needed to establish her own voice, "*my argument"'* in her next essay.

In talking about the role of knowledge acquisition in developing critical thinking, An, in line with Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999), emphasised the value that Confusion-heritage cultures place on respect for authority and scholarship:

> *[…] from an early age, we are not encouraged to challenge the authority. And what Chinese students do most of the time…as one of them… is kind of absorbing the thinking or ideas of the famous teachers and writers. In this way, we are hoping that we can be more knowledgeable and we can get what we want; we can have a better understanding of the area, or even life.*

It is notable that in describing the Chinese academic practices, An does so with the neutral voice of an outside observer, yet she indicates her membership to this discoursal community, by including herself in the process: "*as one of them*". Rather than portraying the Chinese practices as in some way deficient, inferior or in opposition to Western practices, she simply explains the reasons why Chinese students do what they do, and as such explains the conventions of her tradition.

Harika, on the other hand, does not mention her Turkish background as an influencing factor, merely stating the correlation between lack of knowledge and lack of criticality:

> *Sometimes, you know, if you do not know the subject really very well, you're afraid to criticise. Maybe you do not dare to do it.*

The recognition that sufficient subject knowledge is a crucial factor in establishing a position in academic writing reflects the research of Wingate (2011) and Andrews (1995) as discussed earlier.


## 4.2.3. Problems in using the passive, impersonal voice

One of the most visible and significant ways a writer can establish their presence and commit to their claims is through the use of first person pronouns (Hyland 2002a, Ivanic 1998). It is apparent from the interview data collected in this study

that the participants still believe that the use of first person pronouns in academic writing is not appropriate. Both An and Rai explain they avoid using personal pronouns, as in China "*the teachers want the paper to be impersonal*" (An). An remarks that she would rather use 'we' than 'I', and half-jokingly adds "*That's the collective culture!*" An's irony-tinged remark referring to her "*collective culture*" conveys a mature awareness of her culture, simultaneously expressing belonging and detached observation.

She recalls one of her assignments in which she referred to herself as the 'author' and put the sentence in brackets. She received the following feedback comment: "Why do you refer to yourself as the author and in brackets? You are required to develop your voice!"

She reveals that she would like to "*learn this kind of skill*", referring to implementing a more active voice "*because famous authors do this too*". Contrary to CR research (Ramanathan and Atkinson 1999) it is not undue deference to authors that prevents An from using 'I', it is merely that she needs time to develop a 'workable balance' (Groom 2000) between her own voice and the voices of authors:

> *Its not like I would definitely not use I, but it's a change  for me to go through, and I think I will get there, but now I'm not so confident about combining these two kind of styles naturally, so I avoid it.*

The "*two kinds of style*" which An refers to is the personal and impersonal voice, or active and passive structures.  It is the combining of these two different voices in writing that is problematic and confusing to the students, leading to a lack of confidence in expressing their authorial voice.

Harika recounts how she always used the passive voice in her essays, as she considered this to be the norm. However, she reveals that by doing so she was misunderstood by the marker:

> *And because I used passive voices, somehow it was misinterpreted and it was understood as if I didn't add my own voice. It was my own voice but in passive structures.*

She goes on to explain:

> *Of course it affected the way the person perceived it. Because it is different: 'I argue that', and 'it can be said that' or 'it is said that'. Actually it was me who argues it but because I know that it won't be formal to use 'I', I prefer to use 'one might say that'. But it is me!*

As can be seen from the above quotations, the participants, especially Rai and An, express uncertainty and confusion around the issue of when and how to reveal their personal voice through the use of first person pronouns. Promoted in the literature, the personal pronoun is a powerful rhetorical feature by which the writer can explicitly reveal their identity and position (Ivanic 1998). By not using it, and instead using passive structures to position themselves in a text, students can inadvertently 'hide' their voice, resulting in the misunderstanding which Harika described above.

## 4.2.4. A tale of two discourses: the relationship between vernacular and academic discourse.

Canagarajah (2002a p.31) asks a very salient question with regard to how international students construct the relationship between their own vernacular discourse and that of the target academic community: "How do students relate the discourses and cultural practices of their vernacular community to those of

academic communities?" The three excerpts below illustrate three very different approaches.

> Rai: *Until now it's not easy to give my voice because of my disadvantage about my thoughts.*

> An: *[…] they* (referring to the UK academic community) *have a different view of academic writing or doing research. But in China, we also write essays, you know, but not in the sense that our lecturers here require us to do.*

> Harika: *(Addressing the Western academic community) Because when you say voice, what do you mean? This is voice! I'm a bilingual speaker, so I have two languages that I speak, so I just want to add these languages, I just want to add my Turkish, this is my richness.*

From the quotation, it would seem to me that Rai sees the Chinese tradition in deficit terms, as a *"disadvantage"*, perceiving her 'Chinese thoughts' as an impediment to expressing her ('Western' academic) voice. It is striking that Rai, when referring to her own community, uses 'they':

> *In China, they always easy to trust knowledge from the book, they think if the knowledge is written in the book , it is true knowledge.*

It would therefore seem that Rai, in her efforts to adapt to a new Western discourse and assimilate its rhetorical conventions, is in the process giving up her Chinese discoursal tradition or 'thoughts', i.e. way of thinking.

An's responses, on the other hand, seem to suggest that she sees the two discourses on a more balanced and equal footing but distinctly separate from each

other. She views the relationship between the Chinese and UK academic traditions in terms of difference, not deficit.

Harika's response is very interesting, and is one I would like to unpack and explore in more detail. For Harika, the voice she presents in her writing is significantly tied up with her Turkish background and identity. In answer to Canagarajah's question, she would like to take the discourses of her vernacular community with her as she participates in the UK academic community. Unlike Rai, she does not want to suppress her vernacular voice in order to assimilate into the dominant discourse. She also does not want to keep the two discourse systems separate and shuttle between the two as An does. Instead, she would like to have the freedom to "*add my Turkish*" to the conventions valued by the academy, in so doing creating a fusion of the two discourses.

In the following excerpt she goes on to recount how she tried to bring in some linguistic resources which she enjoyed from Turkish into her previous essay, but resulting in a discouraging outcome.

> Harika: *Sometimes I've been even using some Turkish metaphors, and translating it into English [...]. Yeah, sometimes just carrying my background,[...] to carry some linguistic features into English, and try to make it rich, and... Just let me show you the comment that I got about it. Can I read the comment?*
>
> Michelle: *Yeah, yeah.*
>
> Harika: *This is the last comment that I got: "You should also be careful with idioms. If you are not sure whether you can vary a particular idiom, do not - you can end up in a very different idiom". So, if you do not know how to properly use this idiom or metaphor, then do not. Because as a second language learner you do not have the right to play with this language. You're not the owner of this language. So, you can't be creative, you have limits.*

*Like 'You women, know your limits'. So, 'Second language speakers know your limits'.*

Harika wants to present her voice in her essay by bringing to her academic communication, her "*background*", some "*linguistic features*" or resources from her Turkish discourse in order to enhance and enrich her writing. However, as she points out, these creative attempts are not appreciated by the marker, the academic community, who treats these as deviations from the academic conventions and therefore as unproficiency and failure. Harika is notably frustrated by the "*limits*" that she feels are placed on her creative expression in academic writing at a British university. She feels that as a second language speaker she is denied the rights to "*play*" with English with the same freedom and sense of ownership as native speakers do. Her last point is very poignant as she likens the linguistic limitations placed by the academy on second language learners with the limitations placed by society on women.

Harika's emotional response is a reaction to the one-sided approach she feels the academic community has towards the acculturation of international students. On one hand, the UK academic community requires that students present their voice, an argument, in their writing. But it is not good enough that students do so in their own voices, displaying the stylistic features of their vernacular and culture. To claim membership to the UK academic community, international students have to take on the voice that the academy wants them to use and to express that voice within the constraints of the essay genre with its canonical structure and rhetorical conventions. Significantly, these findings confirm the research conducted by Woods (2000) and Andrews (2003), in which they found that students do not perceive the essay as a site which enables the writer to display his/her thinking in a

"dialogic" and "playful manner" (Woods 2000 p.98) and furthermore, as Andrews (ibid) argues, it does not encourage experimentation with style and form in which to present an argument.

## 4.3. The development of participants' academic writing and critical thinking skills

In discussing the process of learning to write in a new discourse, An commented that she found the tutors' feedback on assignments useful in guiding her writing, describing the writing-feedback procedure as: "[...] *exposure, and then comments, and then modification or progress*".

She also mentioned that she attended cross-disciplinary, in-sessional workshops, some focusing particularly on critical thinking. However, she found the ELT and Applied Linguistics department's workshops more helpful:

> *"To be honest, I think the in-sessional lessons are a little bit like what we have in China, like writing clinics, writing workshops, things like that. I think I learned more from our own lecturers. And workshops".*

This view would support the findings from various studies (Elander et al. 2006, Mitchell and Riddle 2000) which show that argumentation is highly discipline-specific and is thus better promoted when integrated with the students' academic learning or in workshops related to the department.

An has a clear and conscious approach as she reflects back on her progress as a writer.

> *I think now I'm more confident with writing an essay because I know what lecturers expect and I've got the feedback and I know what they value. And I think the problem, or the difficulties right now, is only from myself, actually.*

*How well I can get the gist of author's articles, books, and then how I can synthesise those ideas.*

Although she concedes that there are still "difficulties", they are not factors that are beyond her control or understanding, but are located within herself where she can work at them in her own time.

As regards to Harika's experience of academic writing, she felt she was not as successful as she would like to be in expressing herself in the new academic discourse, and this left her feeling frustrated and excluded.

Harika also raised the issue of writing for assessment, which she found to be dispiriting.

*[…] during the year, we just wrote to get grades […]. I believe that this also has negative influence on students. So, for us writing means evaluation. Writing means getting grades. I believe that at the beginning of this program there were students who actually liked writing but now...because of this criticism they got, they do not.*

Harika explains that the grade she will get is of main concern to her, and the thought of assessment instills "*a kind of fear*" in her. Due to this fear of assessment, she has suppressed her expression of ideas:

*I just want to think….as a person, as Harika, what would you really like to write? But I can't dare to ask it to myself.*

Harika suggests a possible way to address this problem. She proposes that at the beginning of the year the students are given one or two short assignments to complete, solely for the purpose of receiving feedback and guidance, not for assessment. In this way the students can at least have one or two opportunities to practice their academic writing skills before being formally assessed. This suggestion echoes Leki's (1995) study in which he mentions that students were

given short, relatively easy essays early in the term before tackling the more complicated, assessed essays.

Responding to a question about her development as a writer, particularly her critical voice, she reflects on her current strategies for writing the dissertation:

> *I've been taking risks actually when I write my dissertation [...]. I will just write it on my own way. Because so far I couldn't dare to do it.*

Harika's approach of doing it "*my own way*" reflects her increased confidence and determination to express her voice and her Turkish influenced discourse in her dissertation, in so doing empowering herself.

Rai, in reflecting on her progress during the year, revealed the significant transformation which had taken place as a result of engaging with a new academic discourse community.

As mentioned before, she failed her first essay, due to an over-dependence on the unaverred and unattributed voice (Groom 2000), to the expense of her own authorial voice. However, this proved to be a very important learning experience for her: "*I feel very grateful for me failed the first one*". She realised that change was required in her approach to academic thinking and writing, and subsequently joined the in-session academic writing support programme at King's College. Rai repeatedly mentioned how much she appreciated this support, as it taught her the basics of UK academic writing and how to develop an argument in her writing.

At the end of the last interview Rai revealed a very poignant realisation:

> *During the year of MA course I think the knowledge of English language teaching theory is very important, I learned some of them. <u>But the most important thing I learned is different thinking way.</u>*

Rai explained that this "*different thinking way*" means looking at a situation or a theory from different angles, and "*you should criticise, to doubt it".* When asked if she could use critical thinking in other areas of her life, she replied: "*I think this new thinking way will influence my life*". Rai's disclosure seems to affirm the findings of Egege and Kutieleh (2004) who report that the students felt that critical thinking had relevance outside study. These findings are thus in contrast to Atkinson (1997) who questions the applicability of critical thinking beyond the educational context. For Rai, adopting a critical thinking approach has had social and personal implications for her life as a whole, its influence and application extending well beyond the context of her studies.

# 5. Synthesising the findings: issues and implications

The excerpts discussed above underline the unique perspective on academic writing and critical thinking which international postgraduate students can bring to the Western academic context. In this section I will synthesise the findings by using the research questions as set out in the previous chapter as a rough framework. However, my principle purpose is to extract some issues and concerns which were brought up during the interviews, and discuss the pedagogical implications in the light of a critical approach towards disciplinary discourse.

## 5.1. What perceptions do international students hold of academic writing in general and critical thinking in particular?

In investigating the participants' experience of academic writing, a recurring theme of confusion (An), uncertainty (Harika) and lack of confidence (Rai) emerged. With regards to academic writing requirements, their responses showed they all knew they were expected to show evidence of structure, argument and appropriate register. Similarly when asked about their interpretation of critical thinking and argument, they conveyed a good understanding of what it entailed, using explicatory phrases like *"critically analyse"* (Harika), *"give your evidence"* (Rai), and evaluate its *"implication in our contexts"* (An). However, they seemed to express great uncertainty whether they have interpreted these expectations correctly. From these comments it is clear that what is needed is a more direct, explicit approach in the instruction of critical thinking in writing.

In discussing critical thinking and related issues, what emerged from the interviews was the students' willingness to adapt to a new discourse and engage in critical thinking. Although some sources in the literature (Ramanathan and Kaplan 1996b, Ramanathan and Atkinson 1999)  have suggested that students coming from Confusion heritage cultures, in particular, are passive and "not ready" for critical thinking (Ramanathan and Kaplan 1996b, p. 232), this is clearly not so in the case of Rai and An. Despite emphasising the contrasts between their own background and the UK academic context, regarding different textual conventions, these two international students clearly had the "agency to rise above their culture" (Canagarajah 2002b, p.101). Hence, although cultural factors do influence writing practices and therefore cannot be ignored, they should not necessarily be seen in terms of deficit. The results from this study support Zamel (1997) and Canagarajah's (2002a) claims that students' cultural and linguistic background do not prevent them from producing successful writing in English, demonstrating evidence of critical thought and analysis.

## 5.2. Which problems do international students encounter with expressing criticality in English academic essays? How does their cultural background influence their writing?

A further area of investigation was identifying some of the problems students experienced in expressing critical thinking in their writing. The findings of the interviews generally support the literature which identified the following problematic areas: insufficient subject knowledge, lack of authorial 'voice' and lastly, the restrictive conventions and canonical structure of the essay genre which can inhibit and limit the student writers' expression. The participants' background

played a role in the way they approached academic writing and expressed their voice in the text.

The students associated a lack of subject knowledge with a lack in confidence (Rai) thereby affecting their ability to present their own argument (Harika). Both An and Rai's responses illustrate the great importance their Confucius-heritage culture places on the acquisition of knowledge through "*absorbing the thinking or ideas of the famous teachers and authors*" (An). This can have a detrimental effect on establishing the writer's voice or argument, as in the case of Rai who failed her first essay as she reflected the views of other authors and not her own. Insufficient subject knowledge, as well as cultural differences in constructs of knowledge, are both factors which can hinder the expression of criticality, but these are hindrances which can be transcended as students acquire more expertise in their field and learn the practices of the target discourse.

The concept of the writer's presence or 'voice' and its linguistic manifestation through the use of first person pronouns is a feature of academic writing which seems to pose some problems for the three students. On one hand higher education still seems to be wedded to the belief that academic writing should employ the impersonal voice (Andrews 2003). Various writing guides advice students to avoid using the first person pronoun, advocating that passive structures are more appropriate. This attitude is reflected in the participants' disclosure that they believe 'I' is not appropriate for formal academic essays, except for signposting or when reflecting back on personal experience. On the other hand, they need to present a strong argument, develop their own 'voice', show agreement or disagreement towards authors and theories and commit to their claims. However, they do so without using 'I think' or 'I (dis)agree with' but instead,

believe they need to employ an impersonal voice manifested through passive structures or distancing devices. Not only does it place an extra linguistic burden on L2 writers, but more significantly, it risks hiding their emerging voices and obstructing their endeavours to position themselves in the text. This was precisely the case with Harika as she acknowledged that a passive voice in her essay *"was understood as if I didn't add my own voice"* and with An, who used the impersonal third person "*the author*" to refer to herself, but in so doing received a feedback comment stressing that she is required to develop her voice.

This problematic situation is further complicated by the ambivalent guidance given to the students in the programme handbook:

> "Some tutors prefer an impersonal style making use of passives and avoiding the use of 'I', although nowadays this preference tends to be more associated with natural sciences than with the humanities and social sciences".

The only conclusion that students can glean from this information is to rather stick to passives and avoid using 'I' lest they engender the disapproval of "some tutors".


In the absence of clear guidelines and what can seem like conflicting expectations, it is understandable that the students are hesitant in adopting an explicit authorial presence in their writing. It would therefore be beneficial to the students if writing guidance and instruction were more transparent and clarified the particular stylistic conventions of the discipline or the requisites of the genre. In general, tutors and academic departments need to review the support that they provide students so as to assure that the expectations are made as explicit as possible. This is especially essential in the light of the growing internationalization of universities which need to make their practices clear in order to facilitate the linguistic and cultural transition of the students to a foreign academic discourse.

The issue of voice has a broader implication than linguistic or rhetorical features as expressed through a personal/impersonal style or the use of first person pronouns. It is also bound up with the writer's identity, and is concerned with "the broader issues of a speaking subject's perspective, conceptual horizon, intention and world view" (Bhaktin 1986 in Stapleton 2002, p178).

In terms of an academic context, Canagarajah (2002a) asserts that students should be able to take their identities, values and background with them as they engage with the academic community. I would like to add to this and argue that international students should be able to bring their own discursive practices and histories into their writing in order to develop a deep and genuine sense of critical thinking and demonstrate effective argumentation. In such a way, students are empowered, not confused, afraid or stripped of confidence, as was revealed by An, Harika and Rai respectively.

In this regard I would like to highlight Harika's experience of engaging with a new academic discourse, and the findings which suggest that she felt her voice to be excluded and constrained by the rigid norms of academic writing:

> *"As a second language learner you do not have the right to play with this language […] so, you can't be creative, you have limits".*

Harika's account is indicative of the present situation where globalisation and the spread of English academic cultures bring different discourses and cultural practices in contact and frequently, in conflict. With the ever-increasing internationalisation of universities, the challenge for academic departments is to re-evaluate the norms of the traditional essay form and widen the parameters of what is possible and permissible in university essays. In this respect I would like to recall the 'countertexts' put forward by Andrews (2003) as possible variations of the essay genre to accommodate a wider spectrum of expression:

The challenge for departments in higher education is to debate such variation and work out a common policy and practice so that students are neither disadvantaged nor confused; and so that students can find the appropriate form of expression for what they want to say in assignments (p. 125).

With regards Harika, she creatively tried to mix her vernacular discourse with the textual conventions of the dominant English academic discourse, but it was treated as a sign of incompetence. She was therefore not allowed to "find the appropriate form of expression" for her voice, for her bilingual identity. Yet, she is required by the discipline to develop her individual voice, in particular through the demonstration of critical thinking in writing.

The question which needs to be asked is: How can the academic community require students to develop their critical voice, and at the same time expect them to submit to the ideological practices and values of Western academic discourse? It seems that educational institutes require students to develop a critical approach *in* academic writing, but disapprove of a critical approach *towards* academic writing.

As higher education is undergoing a period of transformation I agree with Canagarajah (2002b) that it is crucial for the dominant Western academic communities to respect and appreciate the discursive and cultural peculiarities which international students may display, rather than suppressing them. This means that academic communities should be tolerant towards the ways in which academic texts will be "creatively modified according to the strengths brought by the students" (p. 14). Importantly, academic communities should have a bilateral approach, in that not only should students be expected to acculturate to the academic discourse, but the academic community should also accommodate alternative discourses. In such a way a space can be created where students can

develop their critical thinking skills in a manner that is "neither assimilationist nor working from a deficit model" (Jones 2005).


## 5.3. How do international students perceive their development in academic writing and critical thinking skills?

Although the findings underlined the challenges and complexities involved in learning to engage with a new discourse, it also revealed the students' development and progress during the year as academic writers and critical thinkers.

The study highlights the adaptability of the participants to a different educational context and discourse. They revealed that although their linguistic and cultural background influenced their approach to academic writing, they learned to critically analyse texts, identify and evaluate multiple interpretations, integrate their argument in a structured text, and take risks in experimenting with the essay genre. In short, they displayed a solid understanding and implementation of Wingate's (2011) three components of argumentation, and more.

On the whole, each participant looked back at the year and described the trials and errors, the successes and the learning experiences as they engaged with a new discourse.

An mentioned her increased confidence due to the fact that she now knows what is expected of her. She identified some remaining difficulties related to a critical academic approach and located these firmly within herself. This self-confident judgement can be seen as a key to successful postgraduate study, putting the onus on herself to improve her writing practice. Harika expressed confusion and frustration with writing in a new discourse, but in the end decided that the only

way to regain her confidence in writing is to assert her own particular "multivocal" voice (Canagarajah 1997), blending the voices of her experience, culture, values and vernacular in a creative reinterpretation of the academic writing genre.

Of the three students, Rai revealed the most transformation in her development as a writer. During her year as a post-graduate student, she not only learned a new way of writing, but more significantly, a *new way of thinking*". For Rai, engaging with critical thinking allowed her "to engage with the world in a new way" (Crème 1999).  And that is the true, lasting gift of a good education.

# 6. Concluding remarks

The research findings offer some interesting insights into the experiences of international students learning the conventions of a new academic discourse with reference to acquiring and demonstrating critical thinking skills in their writing. Despite the dual challenges of language and adapting to new academic requirements, the international students interviewed seemed to have effectively acculturated to the changed context, either by assimilating, appropriating or transforming the academic textual conventions. Although they mentioned frustrations and difficulties, they all were willing, and even enthusiastic to engage in critical thinking.

The findings also raised some pertinent questions about the role of the students' background and culture in influencing the way they express themselves (critically or otherwise) in their essays. It emerged through their responses that cultural influences should not be ignored, and the participants often contrasted their own discourse practices with that of the target discourse. Nevertheless, this does not presume that their writing or way of thinking can be neatly categorised into distinctive styles, to be uniformly encouraged, or 'remediated' in EAP classes. On the contrary, their approach to writing and their writing styles were shown to be as divergent and complex as their distinct personalities and life experiences.

As regards the difficulties experienced in adopting a critical approach, students mentioned a lack of confidence and subject knowledge as obstacles, but not as barriers to critical thinking. An aspect which they found to be more problematic was that of the rhetorical conventions and rigid norms of the essay genre. The

concept of the impersonal voice proved to be particularly cumbersome to the students, in that it has the tendency to hide or neutralize the student writers' views. Furthermore, one of the participants in particular felt that her voice was restricted by the essay genre in that she couldn't infuse the discourse features from her own community into her essay. It could be inferred that there is a gap between what she wanted to say in her essay and what she understands she is permitted to say.

As the student population is increasingly diversifying, departments in higher education should accordingly broaden the parameters of what is possible in written assignments so as to create more varied and conducive channels for critical thinking and academic expression in general. The type of reconceptualisation of academic literacy that this calls for, will however not take place overnight. In the meantime, international students want to succeed in meeting the requirements of the Western academic discourse. Merely critiquing the dominant discourse, as Wrigley (2010) points out, might not serve the interests of the students who attempt to enter it. In conclusion I would therefore like to review some recommendations to facilitate the expression of critical thinking, which have emerged from the findings of this study.

Firstly, students need clear and direct guidelines and instruction in terms of what is involved in adopting a critical thinking approach in their writing. This can be in the form of workshops in which both local and international students participate and where they are taught how to recognise, evaluate and construct arguments within a Western critical thinking approach. As Egege and Kutieleh (2004) explain, the concept of critical thinking should be presented in an explicit manner, familiarising students with its historical roots, its role and criteria. Besides writing workshops, I would suggest a simple 'Question and Answer' session between the students and a

lecturer to clear up any misconceptions or confusion, not only before writing an essay, but also afterwards, giving the opportunity to clarify any questions about feedback or assessment criteria.

Secondly, to help students understand the expectations of the academic community, I agree with Lillis (2001) in stressing the importance of on-going dialogue between supervisor and student.

Furthermore, students studying in the humanities and social sciences should be made aware that they do not need to use the impersonal voice in their writing and that first person pronouns are accepted and even encouraged.

Finally, as one of the participants suggested, it would be helpful if students had the opportunity to write at least one piece of academic writing without being assessed. In such a way the students can feel more confident and prepared when tackling their first graded essay.

These are all fairly straightforward and practical implementations which could serve to directly benefit students in developing a critical approach, and thus help them to communicate effectively and confidently in the academic community.


The findings from this small-scale study of just three students in one particular context cannot be compared or generalized. The findings do however raise questions for further research, on a larger scale. First, how heterogeneous are the views and experiences of the students? Would students in different disciplines have the same understandings of critical thinking? A second question relates to the selection of students. If L1 students from an anglophone background were also interviewed, which differences or similarities compared with international students would emerge? Finally, how is critical thinking understood and developed in the context of other disciplines? To get a fuller picture of this key concept, studying

specific academic contexts can begin to address how students in different

disciplines conceptualize and develop their critical thinking abilities.

Word count: 14 911

# Appendix: semi-structured interview guide

1. Previous experience of academic writing in English.

2. Understanding of criteria of academic writing in English. Different from your L1 writing?

3. Understanding of critical thinking/argument in academic writing.

4. Difficulties with: academic writing in general.

  :presenting an argument.

5 Developing critical thinking skills through the year

   - Personal strategies: From 1$^{st}$ essay to most recent.

   - Tutor support: Feedback and lectures. Helpful?

   - Institutional support: writing workshops. Helpful?

6. Suggestions/ anything else?

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