

# Negotiating Rules, Agency, and Authority: ESL Students' Understanding of "Good" Academic Writing<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Writing research has generally focused on teachers' diverse notions of writing that justify their teaching and assessing practices. Following Leki's 1996 article *Good writing: I know it when I see it*, the purpose of this naturalistic research was to understand three newly arrived international students' conceptions of argumentative writing in order to attempt to unpack the complex factors leading to those conceptions. The findings of this study provide an idea of the struggle and complexity of the writing process, especially as it relates to academic argumentative writing. Additionally, the findings support a model of researching literacy (Lea & Street, 2006) that goes beyond skills and socialization, but that allows the analysis of negotiation of agency, identity, and authority in an integrative view of writing. Exploring students' notions of writing can better inform second language theory on how students learn, what aspects are relevant to them, what elements from one class are transferred to another – at least conceptually, and how students build autonomy/agency in determining whether the quality of their academic writing is sufficient, especially for content classes.

## Resumen

La investigación acerca de la escritura se ha centrado generalmente en las diversas nociones de maestros la escritura que justifican su enseñanza y evaluación de sus prácticas. A partir del artículo de Leki del 1996 *Good writing: I know it when I see it*, el propósito de esta investigación naturalista fue comprender las concepciones de escritura argumentativa de tres estudiantes internacionales, recién llegados, para tratar de comprender la complejidad de los factores que conducen a esas concepciones. Las conclusiones de este estudio proporcionan una idea de la lucha y la complejidad del proceso de escritura, especialmente en lo relativo a la escritura argumentativa académica. Además, los hallazgos apoyan un modelo de investigación de la alfabetización (Lea & Street, 2006) que va más allá de habilidades y socialización, pero permite el análisis de la negociación de la agencia, identidad y autoridad con una visión integradora de la escritura. Explorar las nociones de los estudiantes de escritura puede informar mejor la teoría de la segunda lengua sobre cómo aprenden los estudiantes, qué aspectos son relevantes para ellos, qué elementos de una clase se transfieren a otra – al menos conceptualmente, y cómo los estudiantes construyen autonomía/agencia para determinar si la calidad de su escritura académica es suficiente, especialmente para las clases de contenido.

## Introduction

The varied notions of writing have shaped its teaching practices (e.g., product vs. process approaches) as well as influenced the ways in which writing is assessed, an area in which numerous concepts of 'good' academic writing have emerged. Differing perceptions of good academic writing are more prevalent in the area of second language writing, where teachers and students may not share the same culture. The notion of good academic writing has already been problematized in Xiao Ming Li's (1996) "*Good Writing*" in *Cross-Cultural Contexts*, which explores

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how ESL writing teachers form their standards of good writing in a cross-cultural context. The conclusions of her ethnographic research on Chinese and American teachers highlight the fact that it is teachers' backgrounds, beliefs, feedback practices, and interactions with one another that standardize their notion of good academic writing, rather than a particular objective level of quality being inherent to the students' text, as had been commonly believed.

Despite these insights, and the constant research that is carried out to compare and contrast teachers' notions or practices, the other side of the coin has not been explored thoroughly. That is, while most research focuses on how teachers' expectations and ideas of writing influence and shape teaching practices, only a handful of published studies have explored how students understand what academic writing is and how their own different expectations influence and shape their learning practices in their composition classrooms (Leki, 1994; 2007).

Therefore, the purpose of this naturalistic study was to examine how three newly arrived international ESL students understood academic writing during the first academic year of their studies at a midwestern U.S. university. This study sought to create a deeper understanding of what the students' notions of academic writing were and how they were shaped and changed from their EFL status to ESL.

Due to the wide scope of academic writing, a special focus was given to argumentative writing since this genre was taught in both the ESL composition class and their English composition class. Additionally, argumentative writing was the primary genre they usually studied in preparation for the TOEFL (*Test of English as a Foreign Language*), which all international students must satisfactorily complete prior to acceptance at the university.

## **Literature Review**

As mentioned above, much of the research on academic writing has focused on teachers. There are however, a few studies that have attempted to look at this issue from the students' perspective. In her survey study of criteria for evaluating students' writing, Leki (1995a) asked twenty ESL students to rank their papers according to their preferences, what they thought their ESL teachers' preferences were, and what they thought their content area teachers would prefer. She also asked 29 teachers from different backgrounds (ESL, non-ESL, and content area) to grade these papers. Leki found that there was a great disparity between what students expected teachers to consider to be a good writing piece and what the professors themselves expressed. Interestingly, she also found that the teachers differed from one another in their ratings. Although Leki did provide an insight into these disparities, the study did not focus precisely on what the students' own notions of good academic writing were, nor on what made the students think in a specific way regarding writing or how they constructed their notions of writing. Additionally, these and other studies have only focused on teachers' intuitions or students' one time responses rather than pursuing more in depth research (Hyland, 2003).

The research that has focused specifically on students is in the area of attitudes and expectations in relation to feedback, ESL classes, writing conferences, and the comparison between ESL and mainstream classes. For instance, Zacharias' (2007) research examines attitudes that both teachers and students have toward written corrective feedback in an ESL writing class. In the results, the author describes teachers' feedback practices and which of these practices students preferred (*e.g.*, more specific feedback). What is important for the present research is the fact that Zacharias found that students sometimes had difficulty accepting teacher feedback that contradicted students' own ideas. However, this research did not offer any insight as to where those students' ideas came from, nor whether they negotiated the meaning, nor whether the student later changed those ideas.

Likewise, in studies that investigated students' expectations of writing conferences and tutorials, it is clear that students either did not know what to expect of these tutorials, that students' expectations were co-constructed as interaction took place, and that students often struggled with what the teacher shared during the conference and their own notions, assumptions, and previous background in writing, leading some researchers to label this as *resistance* (Leki, 1995b) but not indicating where tenets of that resistance or those notions, assumptions or background ideas are engendered.

The literature also includes studies on students' attitudes and expectations in the area of evaluating whether what they learned in an ESL class is relevant for a non-ESL writing class or for content level classes (Leki & Carson, 1994; Braine, 1996; Leki & Carson, 1997; Barkhuizen, 1998). These studies have yielded results that expose students' preferences toward linguistic skill teaching in ESL, such as the importance of good grammar and vocabulary for their own writing and development, rather than rhetorical skills. Although these findings show that students view ESL as just another language class, these students position themselves as language learners rather than as non-proficient communicators or even bad writers (Charney, *et al.*, 1995) capable of making a judgment on the level of their writing, an aspect that has not yet been explored.

It is in this area that the present study falls into place. Exploring students' notions of writing can better inform second language theory on how students learn, what aspects are relevant to them, what elements from one class are transferred to another, at least conceptually, and how students build autonomy/agency in determining whether the quality of their academic writing is sufficient, especially for content classes.

Similarly to Leki's study (2007) in which students were given voice, this naturalistic study does so as well by focusing on the ideas that three ESL students had while taking the last level of ESL composition writing in their first year at a midwestern university in the United States. The following general question guided this investigation: How did the three ESL students participating in the study conceptualize the notion of argumentative writing? The three participants had

taken EFL courses in writing and were students in the ESL composition program where the students have the common goals to study the basic conventions of academic American English writing. The purpose of these classes is to familiarize students with tools and techniques they will most commonly use across the disciplines in their undergraduate studies. It is in this context that students construct knowledge and, possibly, their notions of academic writing.

Therefore, the main theoretical assumption for this project was that reality is co-constructed by people's own ideas and experiences in this "situated learning" environment (Lave & Wenger, 1999). Constructivism claims "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42-43). Using this position, it can be understood that students' notions of academic writing are not objective or given; instead they are subjective and constructed, especially for the degree of agency that learners bring to the learning process (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Therefore, this study aims to provide a perspective on how the three participants understood *good* academic writing, especially the argumentative genre.

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

Participants for this study were selected from among undergraduate ESL students who enrolled in the ESL composition class and were newly arrived to the U.S. Among the 21 students who met that requirement, eight initially expressed interest in participating in the study. Participant selection was based on two factors: i) being newly arrived to the U.S. at the beginning, and ii) taking the English composition class or having taken it by the end of the school year. Thus, three undergraduate students, identified for study purposes as Ping and David, two males and Tina, one female, were the participants in this study. All three students had a TOEFL-iBT (Internet based test) score above 71, the minimum required for admission to the university. Regarding the in-house placement test required for all incoming students, Ping and Tina were placed in the third class of a three course sequence in the ESL composition program. David was placed in the second class. Because the students reported not having extensive writing tasks in other classes, the data gathering happened in their ESL and English composition courses. All of the students were successful completing their ESL writing courses and received a grade of A- or higher.

### *Data Collection*

The sources for obtaining data included semi-structured interviews with the student participants, observation of their composition classes, documents describing the guidelines and writing they were to complete in the courses (syllabus, course packet, assignment sheets), and students' drafts of argumentative papers (with teachers' comments), and student class notes. The variety of sources to obtain data was used primarily to triangulate the information

gathered to contribute to a better ethnographic description that reflected the naturalistic nature of understanding their conceptions of academic writing.

### *Data analysis*

The primary method of analysis of the data was analytic induction (Denzin, 1970; Katz, 2001). This approach uses an iterative process in which the researcher reexamines the data, sketches a tentative definition to the issue being studied, proposes a hypothetical explanation of that issue by noting recurring themes, studies single cases in the data to determine whether the hypothetical explanation can explain the issue in order to prove it or disprove it until a "universal relationship is established, each negative case calling for a redefinition or a reformulation" (Denzin, 1970, p. 195).

In order to arrive at the tentative definition or hypothetical explanation, it was necessary to index and annotate the transcriptions several times during the data collection and analysis stages in order to obtain a general picture and idea of the data. Later, analytic induction was used to identify students' understandings of academic argumentative writing over the course of their ESL and English composition classes. To establish trustworthiness, member checks were conducted twice: once during the analysis process, and another time after the initial findings of the paper were finished.

### **Findings**

The study findings presented in this section support the answer to the study research question articulated above: How did the three ESL students participating in the study conceptualize argumentative writing? The overall answer to the question is that the students conceptualized argumentative writing based negotiated processes which in turn were based on a number of personal and environmental factors. The presentation of the findings supporting this is followed by a discussion section.

### *Negotiating notions of argumentative writing*

A careful interpretation of the analysis of the data suggests that the students' notions of academic argumentative writing were non-static, socially constructed, and mediated differently according to their own interests, experiences, exposure to different teachers and classes, media, and notions of L1 writing. Students also held various notions of what good and bad academic writing was and could "recognize it when [they saw] it" (Leki, 1995a). They could articulate their understanding in terms of rules rather than specific ideas, genres, skills, or abstract concepts. In order to explain this overlap of students' notions, but also to demonstrate the individuality of the participants, the first part of this section is a brief account of each participant's overall understanding and factors mediating their understanding; and the second part is a synthesis of the ideas that overlap.

### *Case Profile 1 - Ping*

Among the three participants, Ping, a business major, was the most avid writer, who enjoyed tasks that required him to write about interesting readings. He reported not being skilled in narrative style papers but good at writing arguments. Ping considered language to be “not a subject [but] just a tool to make people communicate.” During the interview he explained that for him “writing is pretty similar [in all languages]; you just translate from one language to another; you just make some very subtle differences.”

However, this idea differed from his own view of writing when he first arrived to the United States. Due to his Chinese writing background and his English lessons in China, Ping focused more on the linguistic aspects of writing. That is, he initially described good academic writing as the one which contained “fancy words,” not basic vocabulary, and transitions, but later described good academic argumentative writing as having evidence and a good idea. The change in perception was after taking ESL composition and English composition classes.

Ping began discussing academic argumentative writing in terms of school assignments and exams such as TOEFL; however, when discussing the characteristics of what he considered good writing, he shifted genres or talked about writing in general, especially non-academic writing, in which, he explained, most authors will make sense but do not respect the rules of academic writing. He stated that the “method and the tools and the references and the organization or the structure of the paper and the flow” are characteristics of any writing. When referring to school writing, nevertheless, he reported that “there are rules in the writing class” which are not necessarily the same in his other classes, nor in the pieces he reads in newspapers or stories on the Internet.

Because of Ping’s self-confidence in his writing, he said he could sense whether his paper was good or not, depending on how comfortable he felt with the topic. However, the grade and the teachers’ point of view were always the source of modifications to his papers. When asked whether he agreed with the changes or teachers’ comments, he responded that he would negotiate with his teachers when possible, but if his grade would be affected he would try to understand why the teacher wanted a change. Ping considered that what his English teachers in China told him were “rumors” for those rules and concepts and did not apply to his experience in the U.S. except the rules about citation, an aspect he said he would now use if he were writing in Chinese as well as in English.

### *Case Profile 2 - Tina*

Unlike Ping, Tina, a finance major, did not enjoy any type of writing activity in or outside of school and did not read books unless it was a requirement for one of her classes. She considered herself good at writing academic argumentation. She explained why, “I keep learning it, they keep teaching it at school. I’m not taking any other but my two classes [here] have been argumentative too. I think I know

the most about argumentative writing". Tina reported learning other types of writing in China and also in her composition classes here in the U.S.; however, she believed that good writing, "is when there is a purpose. If there is no purpose, the assignment has no point. One class, they want us write a paper telling our feelings and was a total wasteful of time. Pointless". She also shared that poetry and journal writing or other kinds of narratives were more for "personal pleasure" for they had no purpose and she was not interested. Tina's placement of importance on *purpose* as a trait for good writing led her to think about style and other genres of writing:

*There are and there should be different purposes of writing. Such as the textbook, the purpose of textbook is tell you the knowledge and tell you the notation and give the example to help you learn the uh and the news is just to introduce you an event that happened recently and the sample papers the teacher gave us is about how to write the arguments, so the original purpose is different so the style should be different and I don't know which one I like, but different purposes I think should have different style.*

Additionally, Tina elaborated some on her ideas of writing when learning how to write in Chinese. Like Ping, she also focused on the linguistic aspect, expressing that language and grammar were highly valued. Tina identified herself as the "kind of student that follows the teacher," explaining that she always tries to follow what the teacher advises during classes, as well as imitating the models the teacher provides in class. Despite stating she did not do any reading or writing outside of school, Tina reported occasionally reading newspapers on-line, and asking classmates for their advice and opinion on the evidence she would use in her arguments. She recognized that the main gains for being an ESL student is learning how to cite, paraphrase, and summarize. According to Tina's comments, not only would she use English style of organizing a paper and presenting evidence, but she also would cite the information when writing in Chinese, just as Ping had expressed. What is more, unlike Ping, Tina reported using some of the argumentative skills outside academic contexts such as in cover letters for employment "to convince the boss to hire me."

### *Case Profile 3 - David*

David, an engineering major, was the student who showed the most signs of motivation towards learning how to write academically. Unlike Ping who had a very strong sense of style, or Tina who would do what the teachers asked her, David was caught in a dual identity (c.f. Shen, 1989). He often used the phrase "when in Rome do as Romans do" as an explanation of why he wanted to change his style to please an English American audience and to please the teacher, since he said he would keep his Chinese style if he could do it without consequence.

*I would like to you know maintain my style back, at the same time I have to ... I have to realize what is good writing, I mean, I admitted that professors and teachers are more authority than me, so I have to, you know, obey the rules and learn from them that is*

*the true meanings why I came here why I am taking writing for ESL students. So I will change my style I would try to... follow the rules the instructors teach us.*

He explained that it was confusing to keep the styles apart because, just as Ping also expressed, some of the arguments that they read in certain magazines, newspapers, and journals, were different from what he was learning at school. However, he pointed out that as a student he was concerned about his GPA and was not willing to incorporate some aspects he liked about those other readings out of fear that they would not agree with the teacher. Nevertheless, just as Tina mentioned, David thought that there were aspects that all writing shares such as organization, clear points, and certain rules, but they are not necessarily the same as the teachers' rules.

David saw the main difference between academic and non-academic writing the evidence and emotions. However, just as Tina and Ping, David considered non-academic writing examples to be good writing, while academic writing is just "follow rules ...for school, ESL or English class," and "boring." David did not consider he would use these genres or skills he learned in the composition courses once he was out of school.

### *Discussion*

The findings reported here illustrated how the three participants negotiated and thus constructed their conceptions of argumentative writing. These results point to the constant negotiation the students engaged in with their own agency and authority. While they were aware of their position as language learners, they also were agents in the process of learning about writing in a second language; however, this self-learning identity was shadowed by their language learner identity in conjunction with their notions of authority. As seen above, the students had a sense of what they believed good argumentative writing was, which was not necessarily academic writing. The students expressed that good argumentative writing does not follow the academic rules they learn at school; however, if there was good argumentation in an academic setting this had to follow the rules, especially if it was written by students who cannot change those rules.

### Understanding of academic writing (argumentation)

Despite the apparent degree of dependency on grades or course/school policies (plagiarism) to understand what writing is, the students constructed notions that went beyond the teachers' notions, course packet and materials (e.g., assignment sheets), but were problematized and mediated by their previous experiences, their preferences, their goals, and exposure to self-prescribed model or electronic documents, which posed a complexity and challenge to articulate what academic writing is, which often resulted in contradictory notions. Thus, in synthesis what students were able to articulate was the following:

Academic writing did not necessarily meet their idea of *good* writing (writing they like, they enjoy, or would mimic or learn from). Most good writing can be found



outside of academic writing where people are able to express their opinions and their styles maintaining a good organization and flow (this can be seen in Ping's comments about rules being broken in non-academic writing). Rules of academic writing argument include providing strong evidence, utilizing formal language, having a "circular organization" (intro-body-conclusion) (David), stating a clear thesis statement at the beginning (Ping), and following citation conventions (Tina). Bad academic argumentative writing has emotions. Although students valued the use of emotions in non-academic writing which they considered the good writing, if the academic writing had emotions, then it was not a good argumentative piece (Ping and David's comments). Good writing in general does not follow rules given in academic writing courses. Rules make the writing boring and strict. Academic argumentative writing is a necessity for school and the composition classes, but it is not relevant for the "real world" (Tina, David).

In general, the students were aware of what they thought argumentation was outside the academic context, which helped them shape their notion of academic argumentative writing. However, due to the discrepancy between the characteristics of that writing and the rules and different expectations that teachers had, the students had a challenge consolidating and concretizing a general idea of academic argumentative writing. What is more, they also had a struggle defining what *good* writing is. For instance, on the one hand they reported that one of the rules of academic writing is that it should not convey emotion; however, they rejected this idea by pointing out that texts both in and outside academia have emotional discourse. Thus, the writing they have to do as students is fraught with rules that they cannot break and rules that make the genre "boring" or just for the teacher. Academic writing is situated within the confines of school but not relevant to the "real world" (Ping) or the preferred style (David).

As Leki's (1995a; 1995b) papers indicate, students are aware of the different expectations teachers have of their writing. Thus, understanding the argumentative genre or other genres of academic writing appears to be a guessing game, which does not aid in their development as writers, but bolsters their idea of a language learner who has little or no authority on the rules of academic writing. Students view teachers and professors as the authority that knows how to utilize the rules and conventions. As the three students expressed, they had to conform to those rules even if they thought a different style of writing was better or preferable. In a way, one can say that the students were aware of the audience but not in a systematic way. That is, their audience was still limited to the teacher who would give them the grade. This "other" oriented writing is tailored to the perceived needs and preferences of the more powerful and authoritative figure, even more so if there is a grade involved. In this light, the students were passively aware of their agentive identity (not using it); on the contrary, they were very aware of their role of students, language learners, and passive recipients and receptors of the needs of every teacher, formulating a notion of lack

of sense of authority for themselves, and an authoritarian view of the teacher or powerful writers who were already famous and could already break the rules or who were native speakers that could play with the language.

### **Implications and conclusion**

The findings and discussion of this research paper elucidate some of the process of academic literacies acquisition as a negotiation between students' identities, authorities, and agency at the undergraduate level. On the one hand, any notion of writing is ever changing, non-linear, and difficult to concretize. On the other hand, the students appeared to have parallel understandings of writing (academic vs. non-academic), and they seemed to consider the genres taught in composition classes as not exactly relevant for their field or daily lives, making their notion of writing fluctuate between teachers' expectations and their own preferences. Additionally, writing solely to meet teacher's needs or for a grade makes the idea of transfer a chimera for students, for it becomes a blurred notion, especially when they navigate from EFL to ESL context and from ESL to mainstream. It would be the discovery and value of the student's own agentive nature that could make the transfer possible. This is why the findings support a model of researching literacy (Lea & Street, 2006) that goes beyond skills and socialization, but that allows the analysis of negotiation of agency, identity, and authority in an integrative view of writing as it was glimpsed in the three students' views of writing. Exploring students' notions of writing can better inform second language theory on how students learn, what aspects are relevant to them, what elements from one class could be transferred to another, and how students build autonomy/agency in determining whether the quality of their academic writing is sufficient, especially outside of EFL and ESL settings (*e.g.* content classes).

These results, however, must be interpreted with caution. This ethnographic study allowed for an in-depth study of these three cases. It will be necessary to replicate the study to understand other students in other contexts and under other circumstances. For instance, it would be enlightening to study how graduate students, who have a better sense of genres and the demands of academic genre in their area of expertise, understand, construct, and evolve those notions, and how the issue of transfer, agency, identity, and authority play a role in that meaning negotiation. Equally important, would be to study participants whose composition classes are linked directly to a discipline in order to understand how contextualizing task may shape their notion of academic writing.

As second language writing educators, our job will reside in making the role of composition classes relevant to students' writing and students' lives (Johns *et al.*, 2006). Academic writing whether argumentation or any other genre will have to be positioned in relation to other genres and outside of academic settings. In other words, it should be situated within a larger context. Perhaps, contextualizing EFL and ESL composition (even at early stages) or English composition within another class, will give students an idea of how to successfully

transfer skills from one area to another. For instance, the institution of learning communities (where one composition class collaborates with a history, math, music, or nursing class) may aid in the collaboration of teachers and their subjects, not to standardize the view of writing, but to help erase the conception that writing is only done for a teacher or to meet single teacher's expectations. Also, that the rules and conventions shared in the syllabus or assignment sheets are a way to contextualize a task but not as means of instituting a set of rules that govern a specific way of writing. Another option is what Larsen-Freeman (2007) implies in her chaos/complexity view of learning, and that is that it is important to raise language awareness, so language education must not focus on giving reasons why a language works in a certain way (in this case it would be rhetoric), but provide reasons for students to exercise their autonomy and decide which aspect to retain. A third option would be to create more template-like materials that concretize the moves of academic writing (Grow, 2008) for *both* teachers and students, such as the moves of argumentation in English in *They say/I say* book by Graff and Birkenstein (2006). However, such sources only capture the superficial endeavor of argumentation and do not help students synthesize their conflicting notions of writing or identities that involve notions of writing in their first languages. Combining the use of academic and non-academic texts in the composition classroom could aid the students' understanding not to have a conflict or struggle, but a consensus view of writing. In this way, learning cannot be simply situated within the confines of ESL composition class, English class, school classes, but an integrative view of writing that can be applied in any context observing the purpose, audience, and style needed to be effective communicators.

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