An Explorative Study of Task Representation in Academic Writing: Second Language Writers in a Graduate Course in the United States

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Abstract

Despite a high score in Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and a fluent command of English in non-academic contexts, international graduate students may find themselves struggling to write academic papers, perhaps almost immediately after they begin graduate education. Although graduate faculty can see variations on student papers, they may not realize what creates the variations, how they are created, and how significant they can be in task interpretation. This explorative study examined how three multilingual doctoral students developed an understanding of and negotiated pre-dissertation writing tasks. Interviews, papers with instructor comments, and field notes were collected from two sections of a course at a TESOL graduate program. The findings suggest that even experienced L2 writers engage in guessing and negotiation in order to understand and complete the writing tasks they are assigned. They indicate that from the beginning of defining a writing task, L2 writers engage in a guessing game and that a combination of guessing and self-positioning as a novice is a dominant feature of graduate academic writing. Although students encounter a number of complications while socializing into task expectations, successful socialization comes through the relative positioning of self and the academic community and implicit instruction.

Keywords: task representation; academic writing; graduate writing; second language writing; socialization; academic literacy

International students want to improve their writing skills in a second language (L2), which is transformative and by no means easy (Kim, 2018b). Despite a high score in Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and a fluent command of English in non-academic contexts, ESL graduate writers may find themselves struggling to write academic papers perhaps almost immediately after they begin graduate education in an English-speaking environment. Unfortunately, however, graduate academic writing remains largely understudied in spite of the increasing number of L2 students and an increasingly diverse student body in English-medium universities. Some faculty might assume that they are simply not ready for doctoral-level work. Or conversely, others may not realize they still need writing support (Simpson, 2012). Then, one of the essential

questions has become what it means to improve academic literacy in a specific discipline, particularly at the doctoral level, if the readiness is not the only issue. This study aims to show the issue has less to do with readiness per se; it has more to do with the "layered complexity" (Casanave, 2002, p. 27) of socialization into new academic communities (Duff, 2012, 2019) by demonstrating what goes into variations in task representation. Although graduate faculty can see variations on student papers, they may not realize what creates the variations, how they are created, and how significant they can be in task interpretation.

Literature Review

Graduate Literacies

One of the fundamental properties of graduate disciplinary writing is that, as Leki (2011) emphasized, it is acquired "to a much lesser degree through direct instruction…, but mostly samples, models, readings, and, crucially, feedback on graduate students' attempts to replicate them" (p. 97). Through the implicit instruction, graduate students continuously negotiate expertise and identity as well as strategies to address academic challenges, as studies on graduate literacy demonstrated (e.g., Kim, 2016, 2018a; Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Castello, Inesta, & Corcelles, 2013; Kumar & Stracke, 2007; McIntosh, Pelaez-Morales, & Silva, 2016; Morita, 2000; Tardy, 2016; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). In the collection of reflective studies, Casanave and Li (2008) straightforwardly framed graduate literacy practices within a broad theoretical lens of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In this situated learning framework, newcomers construct social identities as legitimate participants by engaging with what full members do (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The community of practice framework highlighting the dynamic and situated nature of academic literacy has been attracting considerable interest. For instance, adopting a powerful metaphor of writing games to recognize "academic writing as a game-like situated social practice" (p. 19), Casanave (2002) claims that "the players are constrained by game rules but retain agency and intention that allow them to play strategically, stretching the game rules, finding inconsistencies and loopholes, and interpreting ambiguities in ways both reinforce and change the game" (p. xiv). Her emphasis on addressing uncertainties and repeating participatory practice is a relevant aspect of the socialization approach to academic literacies. Duff (2007) conceptualized learning as "developing the capability to participate in new discourse communities as a result of social interaction and cognitive experience" in the socialization process (p. 4). This perspective implies promising potential that socialization is facilitating language learning (Ellis, 2008), thus indicating the importance of social dimensions of second language learning (Duff, 2019). Following these ecological perspectives of academic literacy, this study situates academic literacy development within a larger domain of socialization into practices of academic communities (Basturkmen, East, & Bitchener, 2014; Casanave, 2002; Duff, 2019; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The past decade has seen an increasing interest in the transformative nature of doctoral education and mentor-mentee relationships in dissertation stages after coursework (e.g., Basturkmen, East, & Bitchener, 2014; Belcher & Hirvela, 2005; Casanave, 2010; Li & Flowerdew, 2008; McIntosh, Pelaez-Morales, & Silva, 2016; Paltridge, 2002; Zhu, 2016). However, research on writing at the pre-dissertation stage has been relatively rare

despite the high stakes nature of writing. Among the few studies on the initial years of doctoral education in L2 (e.g., Kim, 2018a; Seloni, 2012; Zhu, 2016), Seloni (2012) investigated how a dialogic process in multiple spaces outside the classrooms mediates academic socialization. L2 writers who are still in the process of acquiring the L2 are likely to face more challenges than English-speaking writers (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Leki, Cumming, Silva, 2008; Matsuda, 2012). Doctoral level work gets more challenging, given that it entails learning ways of writing and thinking in a discipline as a legitimate member of the community of practice (Casanave & Li, 2008; Cheng, 2014; Cumming, 2016; Lave & Wenger, 1991), which, in turn, is an issue of social identity (Ivanič, 1998).

Moreover, scholarly communication works differently across disciplines, partly because "literacies are not just tools we pick up and put down as we need them, but are central to community epistemologies and personal identities" (Hyland, 2017, p. 9). As such, L2 writers wade into the issues of language learning, academic literacy, and general learning at the same time to address literacy demands. Thus, the social aspect of academic writing takes our insight into language learning a step further. But, the question still remains as to the process through which L2 writers perceive and negotiate writing tasks in a new academic community, particularly in the initial stages of enculturation. Research has demonstrated that writers' task representation has a positive impact on written performance (Zarei, Pourghasemian, & Jalali, 2017). However, the impact of task perception on academic socialization is understudied, especially at the graduate level. Understanding how multilingual writers approach a task, define rhetorical problems, set goals in each stage of writing is significant for a fuller picture of academic writing development, considering that "constructing a task representation appropriate for the rhetorical context" (Zhu, 2005, p. 146) is essential to academic socialization.

Task Representations

Tardy (2009) characterized task as "specific goal-oriented, rhetorical literacy events in both disciplinary and classroom domains" (p. 11). She explains that "tasks are critical to building genre knowledge because they present individuals with goals, constraints, exigencies, and social circumstances" (p. 279). How learners perceive a task can shape and reshape their various rhetorical choices as well as their selection of resources and strategies. Flower (1990) defined task representation as "an interpretative process that translates the rhetorical situation…into the act of composing" (p. 35), although she overlooked the significance of social factors. It is critical in the relationship between writing and learning (Penrose, 1992) and in students' writing process and products (Zhu, 2005).

To perform academic writing tasks, students should also "make a plan of action that will lead to a written product that appropriately fulfills the writing task" (Wolfersberger, 2007, p. 73). It is well established that student writers construct tasks and their representations of the tasks quite differently from each other (Connor & Kramer, 1995; Flower, 1990) and their teacher (Hamp-Lyons, 1997; Lillis, 1999). Furthermore, students intentionally or unwittingly use their resources to negotiate their internal perceptions of the assigned writing tasks. Some factors are specific to the student: the culture and past experiences (Duff & Kobayashi, 2010; Leki, 1995, 2011) and possibly language proficiency (Connor & Kramer, 1995). More general factors can also affect learners' response to tasks: strategies and goals, cognitive and social aspects (Flower, 1990), the types of source texts, the purpose of a task defined by a writer (Zhu, 2005), models (Leki, 1995; Macbeth, 2010), or even their perceptions of the professor (Prior, 1995).

Research has documented how task interpretations can be different and how learners negotiate task representations (Duff & Kobayashi, 2010; Zhu, 2005). Duff and Kobayashi (2010) showed a further refinement of the construct *task interpretation*. They presented international undergraduate exchange students' conceptualization of a task and negotiation of task interpretations in performing a group presentation. The researchers argue that "[the students'] task interpretation was a necessary reconciliation of their preconceived notions about course presentations, their prior observations, and the explicit socialization and instruction by the teacher about criteria" (p. 82). For instance, one of the participants, Kiku, perceived that the academic presentation would be more about experiences without relying on sources. This perception was in sharp contrast to her partner's interpretation of the task. Her partner's past experiences led her to believe that the task should involve researching sources, citing them, and conducting interviews as well.

Additionally, especially looking at a Chinese graduate student's use of source articles for reading-to-writing tasks, Zhu (2005) emphasized that among the significant roles of source articles were to help learners represent a task. It is worth noting that Zhu investigated how one writer perceived different tasks over the three semesters by examining six library research papers. Presumably, the same task was represented differently by the same writer, which shows variations across task representations by even one single writer. Or the variations can signify progress and an outcome of socialization. Zhu (2005) identified factors affecting the participant's construction of a task: "his goals, his perceptions of the purpose of the reading-to-writing tasks and the courses, his beliefs and experience, and the conceptual models provided in the source texts" (p. 145). Through a combination of writing activities and meta-linguistic awareness of academic writing, courses can lead to "changes in task conceptualization," which involve "gradual development towards a more multidimensional mental model of writing" (Manchón & Roca de Larios, 2011, p. 199). Negotiating the concept of writing and writing tasks certainly entails layering ambiguities, considering that multiple factors, activities, and interpretations come into play.

Assuming a Novice Role in New Settings

How to cope with uncertainties may differ across learners. A guessing strategy is not unusual in academic contexts. For example, in Negretti's (2012) study of a connection between task perception and students' metacognitive awareness, guessing potential difficulties to complete a task was one of the top three codes regarding task perception. To better understand the dynamics, this paper drew upon Sommers and Saltz's (2004) concept of novice as expert. Their study of undergraduate writers provides evidence that positioning oneself as a novice allows writers to be flexible enough to shape their established knowledge and practices based on new knowledge. Sommers and Saltz argue that successful students in their freshmen years would see themselves as novices.

Recently, Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) made a similar argument regarding the complex ways in which students' prior experiences of writing interact with their willingness to "assume a learner's role" (p. 330) upon new writing demands. They identified two types of learners: boundary crossers and boundary guarders. The boundary crossers are what Sommers and Saltz would call novices because they "repurposed and reimagined their prior genre knowledge for use in new contexts" (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011, p. 325). Reiff and Bawarshi observed that they have "more willingness to shift away from the writing experiences with which they felt comfortable, confident, and successful" (p. 330). One

characteristic of these learners was that they express less confidence and feel the need to modify strategies. In contrast, Reiff and Bawarshi pointed out that boundary guarders tend to rely on their prior genre knowledge with certainty without a sophisticated analysis of different aspects of this knowledge. Although this line of research focuses on undergraduate writers, it demonstrates what impact self-positioning can have on new rhetorical contexts. However, it is not clear whether this insight is also valid with graduate-level education.

The Study

The present study explored three ESL students' task perceptions and their relationship with socialization at the doctoral level. This study was conducted in a TESOL doctoral program at a Mid-Atlantic university in the United States. In addition to the convenience of recruiting international students, I chose the TESOL program as a research site due to its interdisciplinary nature. The field of TESOL involves insights from multiple disciplines such as applied linguistics, linguistic anthropology, sociology, and composition and rhetoric. Hence, while the findings of this small-scale explorative study are by no means generalizable to the international student population, they might be worthwhile to educate L2 writers in social sciences.

Data Collection

With Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) approval, I advertised this project to recruit international students by visiting the courses offered in the first year of the program and talking to international students in general at social events in the program. I could recruit only three participants for two reasons. First, there was a relatively small number of international students in the program. Second, this project required a set of particular traits: (1) students whose first language was not English, (2) students who were enrolled in the courses required in the earlier years in the program, (3) students who received their formal education in their home countries to exclude 1.5 generations.

With signed consent forms from the participants, I collected multiple sources of data, which included interviews, course observations, and their papers with teacher comments. I attended every class of the section in which the two participants were enrolled, 44 hours in total. I conducted face-to-face interviews with two participants and email interviews with two participants (one participant did both face-to-face and email interviews), as summarized in Table 1. I had planned to collect both interviews and electronic responses. However, I had to modify my initial plan for interviews due to the participants' schedules and preferences. Interviews focused on the participants' literacy practices and reconstructions of how they understood and completed the writing tasks (see the Appendix for interview questions). I collected approximately 175 pages of texts in total: student drafts with feedback, transcripts of audio-recorded and email interviews, observational notes, and written artifacts from the course.

Table 1. Data Collected

Pseudonym	Interview (after the semester was over)	Email Response	Essays with Teacher Feedback (double-spaced in 12 point-font)	Class Observation
Ibnu	20 minutes	2,211 words	35 pages	44 hours
Earny	No	1532 words	25 pages	44 hours
Chanwoo	43 minutes	No	No	No

My positionality needs to be discussed because it has implications for how the participants interact with me during interviews and what information they proffer. As an international student myself, Korean is my first language, and English is my second language. I had completed my formal education up to my master's degree in South Korea and came to the United States to obtain a doctoral degree in TESOL and applied linguistics. At the time of data collection, I was a doctoral student like the participants. Particularly, I was close to them because I was a classmate of Ibnu and Earny and had many informal interactions with Chanwoo through the Korean community to which I belonged.

My positionality as a researcher and the participants' friend shaped the process of data collection and analysis since I used this insider perspective actively. This acknowledgment allows readers to understand where the interpretations came from. Although I prepared interview questions, I conducted active interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003) in that I saw the interview as space where the participant and I constructed meaning collectively. As such, whenever I noticed the participants become enthusiastic about a topic, I encouraged them to elaborate on it, rather than sticking to the predetermined questions. Moreover, as I was part of the same cohort as Ibnu and Early and taking the target class with them, I was active in sharing my academic and emotional challenges as a graduate student and in asking specific questions on their responses. When I had follow-up questions or needed to clarify their answers, I either contacted them via email or met with them individually.

The Participants and Analysis

The participants received formal schooling in EFL settings and came to the United States to earn postgraduate degrees. However, all of them completed their master's degrees in English-speaking institutions, as indicated in Table 2. Their TOEFL scores were higher than 260 in CBT, which represented advanced levels of English proficiency.

Table 2. Participants' Profiles

Pseudonym	Ibnu	Earny	Chanwoo
Nationality	Indonesia	Saudi Arabia	South Korea
Age	Early 30s	Early 30s	Late 30s
Gender	Male	Male	Male
Section enrolled	Section 2	Section 2	Section 1
Years in the program at the time of the study	1	1	2
Years in English-speaking environments before joining the program	4 (Australia)	1 (United Kingdom)	4 (United States)

Inductive analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data for this study (Bryman & Burgess, 1994), along with the constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). All the interviews were transcribed verbatim. I read transcripts, student papers with written comments, and classroom artifacts multiple times to find salient and recurrent themes and patterns. Mainly, I identified themes in the participants' responses first to privilege the participants' voices (Motha, 2009) and then analyzed the written documents and observation notes in relation to the emerged themes from the interviews. Particularly, open, axial, and selective coding strategies were employed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In other words, all the interview and response data were examined through multiple readings to identify emergent themes regarding the focus of this study. Then, I reorganized these themes to understand the interrelationship among them, using axial coding. Finally, I refined the categories identified, resulting in four themes. This analysis process was not sequential but cyclical so that I could compare the themes to the other sources of data, with the interviews at the center.

The Target Course and Tasks

The instructor led the two sections of the course entitled *Introduction to Research* with the same syllabus and teaching methods. This required course was offered during the first year of the program. They met for about three hours once a week. The class dealt with theories of research and philosophical traditions about research, which the participants perceived as crucial differences between masters and doctoral level education. The participants were not familiar with the writing tasks for this class. Accordingly, it further allowed me to explore how they coped with new literacy tasks. For the first writing task, students were required to describe one philosophical concept from a textbook and discuss its implications. The second assignment was to reflect on published articles of students' choice about the philosophical implications. In the third task, students were to analyze two published quantitative-oriented studies. Students were not required to submit preliminary drafts for professor feedback before the due dates. Consequently, they did not have the chance to incorporate the feedback immediately in their final drafts.

Findings

Overall, the two sections of the target course showed differences in the patterns and the number of discussions about the tasks, although the writing tasks emerged from the same syllabus and instructor. Within the framework of the course defined by the professor and, more broadly, by the institution and academic field, the two sections developed their own ways of using writing. In what follows, I discuss four themes that stood out from the analysis: (1) a multiplicity of task representation, (2) utilizing resources to guess as a novice, (3) adjusting task perceptions by making informed choices, and (4) deciding how to approach the task.

A Multiplicity of Task Representations: "The Assignment Was Really Vague"

When graduate writers understand and negotiate writing assignments, the multiplicity of task perceptions comes into view (Prior, 1995). In the target course for this study, the third assignment asked students to analyze two articles in terms of how the articles dealt with quantities. The professor described it as:

> *First, choose one or more ideas in the study and explain how the author transforms them into quantities, measurements, or variables to undertake the study, and then how she transforms them back into ideas or concepts in order to draw conclusions. Second, give your own interpretation of the study's overall success by telling, in your own way, what nuances of meaning are gained and lost as these transformations are made.* (Syllabus)

Clearly, the participants' interpretations of the third assignment illustrate how diverse task representations in students' minds can be:

> **Chanwoo:** *I knew what to do about this assignment. We needed to compare two articles focusing on quantitative data. Because we had to compare the advantages and disadvantages of those two...* (Interview)

> **Ibnu:** *The one that requires us to turn ideas into quantities and back into ideas... If I had one thing to say that I had a problem with is the nature of the subject itself. I had not learned anything about philosophy before I took this class so I was kind of struggling in that sense.* (Interview)

> **Earny:** *The assignment was really vague as I have never experienced such nature of paper. However, after I got the feedback from my professor I realized that there is no fixed way of approaching this paper. Different students address this paper differently, and they got the same mark.* (Email)

First, whereas the third assignment, in Chanwoo's mind, required them to "compare the advantages and disadvantages," it meant to Ibnu that the students were required to "*turn ideas into quantities and back into ideas.*" The degree of certainty to which each participant felt about this assignment also varied. The complex nature of task perceptions persisted throughout the semester and in their recollections.

Another example of multiple interpretations of a task can be found in the participants' perceptions of the second paper. The professor included "edited writing" on the syllabus only for the second assignment. This phrase had differential effects on the writing processes of the participants. Each participant responded:

> **Ibnu:** *I can't remember devoting much more attention to my sentence-level errors only because of that line. I treated all my assignments the same. I even thought that the content of the paper was much more important than the mechanics of it until I discovered that the teacher had marked all the grammatical and typographical errors when the paper was returned.* (Interview)

> **Earny:** *This gave the conclusion that the professor is more concerned about the form/mechanics/ language rather than the content. Thus, in this paper, I spent much of my time editing the paper (e.g., revising the paper several times and seeking peers' feedback on form). Thus, I did not have a chance to focus on the content.* (Email)

> **Chanwoo**: *All the three assignment were the same to me in that regard.* (Interview)

Apparently, they set goals for each assignment, and the goals were different from each other due to the multiple interpretations; while Ibnu focused on content, Earny concentrated on editing. In short, members of the same community may interpret literacy demands differently.

To guess how to complete the assignments based on their task perceptions, they employed a variety of strategies throughout the semester, which were not limited to the boundary of the classroom and the class materials. For example, Chanwoo relied mostly on the syllabus and asking peers who took the same course in the past. He also reported that he asked the teacher directly when he noticed "ambiguous sentences" (Interview) in the guidelines. In contrast, Earny and Ibnu formed a study group that consisted of about five students in the target section to discuss the course contents. One common strategy that all the participants used was their efforts to find sample essays online, which was not successful. Instead, they referred to articles published in prestigious journals or by well-known scholars, although they were acutely aware that the structures and features of those professional pieces were quite different from their assignments. Developing graduate writing through implicit instruction this way is consistent with Leki's (2011) empirical observation that graduate writing is acquired "to a much lesser degree through direct instruction" (p. 97).

Utilizing Resources to Guess as a Novice: "I Like Challenges and Problem-solving Games"

It is necessary to note that all participants said that they were relatively familiar with the types of writing assignments at the graduate level due to the several years of studies in English-speaking countries. Nonetheless, they understood that the target assignments were only similar to the tasks that they did in the past. The participants felt overwhelmed and frustrated since the content (epistemology) and the tasks were new to them. To make matters even more frustrating, they could not find examples of the tasks they were expected to produce. It was intriguing, however, to see how Ibnu addressed this challenge. Ibnu recalled:

> *Although this epistemological stuff was new to me, after a few weeks of classes, I was able to understand what they are about. After my paper was returned, I was quite happy that what I decided to do was accepted. However, the worry was there; I was left wondering what the outcome would be. To some degree, I had to rely on my own judgment about what to do because I don't think the syllabus provided everything that I needed to know. But I took it as a challenge and*

thought that not everything has to be spelled out. Why not have our professors write papers for us if that is the case ... I like challenges and problem-solving games. (Interview)

First of all, one unanticipated finding was that it took at least several weeks for a highly successful L2 writer like Ibnu to represent a task in mind in such a way that it would fulfill disciplinary expectations. Through the extensive process, he accommodated his perspectives on the assignments. Ibnu's "judgment about what to do" turned out to be an essential aspect of his writing process for this class. He made assumptions based on the available information—the course reading and course discussions in this case. While some assumptions were reinforced, others were discarded or modified. He guessed as a novice (Sommers & Saltz, 2004). This positioning and the newness of the second paper did not seem to frustrate Ibnu as much as Earny, who felt that the assignment was "really vague" (Email). Rather, Ibnu "took it as a challenge" and "problem-solving games" instead of wanting everything to be elaborated on the syllabus. Predictably, he developed his tolerance for inevitable ambiguity in task descriptions from his master's experiences in Australia. The excerpt below displays what it means to have prior literacy experiences in academic settings:

> *When I got to the U.S., I had already lived for four years in Australia. So, I was already kind of familiar with the system. I didn't really find things shocking. The only thing that I found different was perhaps the amount of work that I had to do for the doctoral program, compared to what I had to do for the masters in Australia. But, this was expected, and I had no problem adjusting.* (Ibnu, Interview)

That is, for Ibnu, to be familiar with academic writing means he became "familiar with the system," not "the nature of the subject itself" (Interview). Likewise, Chanwoo also acknowledged that "*tasks are not exactly the same, but they have patterns*" (Interview). Thanks to their prior educational experiences, Ibnu and Chanwoo were better able to understand the complexities of the system and how the disciplinary community worked (Casanave, 2002; Casanave & Li, 2008; Duff, 2019). Thus, the students guessed what to do, but it was educated guesswork because they came to a reasonable guess based on their understanding of the system and the similar pattern to their previous experiences.

Making informed guesses also involved utilizing resources outside the classroom, in addition to a passive aspect of this guessing process, such as asking questions in class or reading course materials very carefully. For instance, the third assignment was especially new to every participant in this study. Unexpectedly, it had differing effects on each participant. Although Ibnu and Chanwoo recognized the vagueness of the task, they said they were confident about how they would complete the task regardless of this uncertainty and the resulting frustrations. Their efforts to interpret the task entailed guesswork. Then, all participants sought out feedback to test their hypothesis drawn from the information available at the moment. Some sources of feedback were presented to them naturally or were determined by a course and institution, while others were initiated and developed by the students (Kim, 2016, 2018a).

For example, the conversations of the study group that Ibnu and Earny started involved exchanging peer feedback. In contrast, Chanwoo sought out more professional help by visiting the writing center very often with his drafts and actively participated in scholarly events on and off campus (Interview). These interactions provided the foundation for their guesswork. In other words, with their strong motivation, uncertainty, flexibility, and

frustration led them to participate in other communities of practice, a study group and the writing center, which was behind the process of guessing. This entire process ultimately resulted in their socialization into the field to which they aspired to belong. Thus, given that socialization occurs through multiple agents in multiple directions, it is important to acknowledge the process of constant guessing and the significance of looking out beyond the classroom to the social network of practice for a fuller understanding of academic English socialization (Ferenz, 2005; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2014).

In addition to academic interaction from peer networks, the feedback from the professor was an essential factor that shaped the writers' task representation, the outcome of continuous guessing. This form of implicit instruction may have accepted or rejected some aspects of the student papers, which substantially influenced their ways of writing later assignments. A representative example was how Ibnu responded to the teacher's feedback although it was one single word—"Good!"—commenting on Ibnu's chart, as shown in Figure 1.
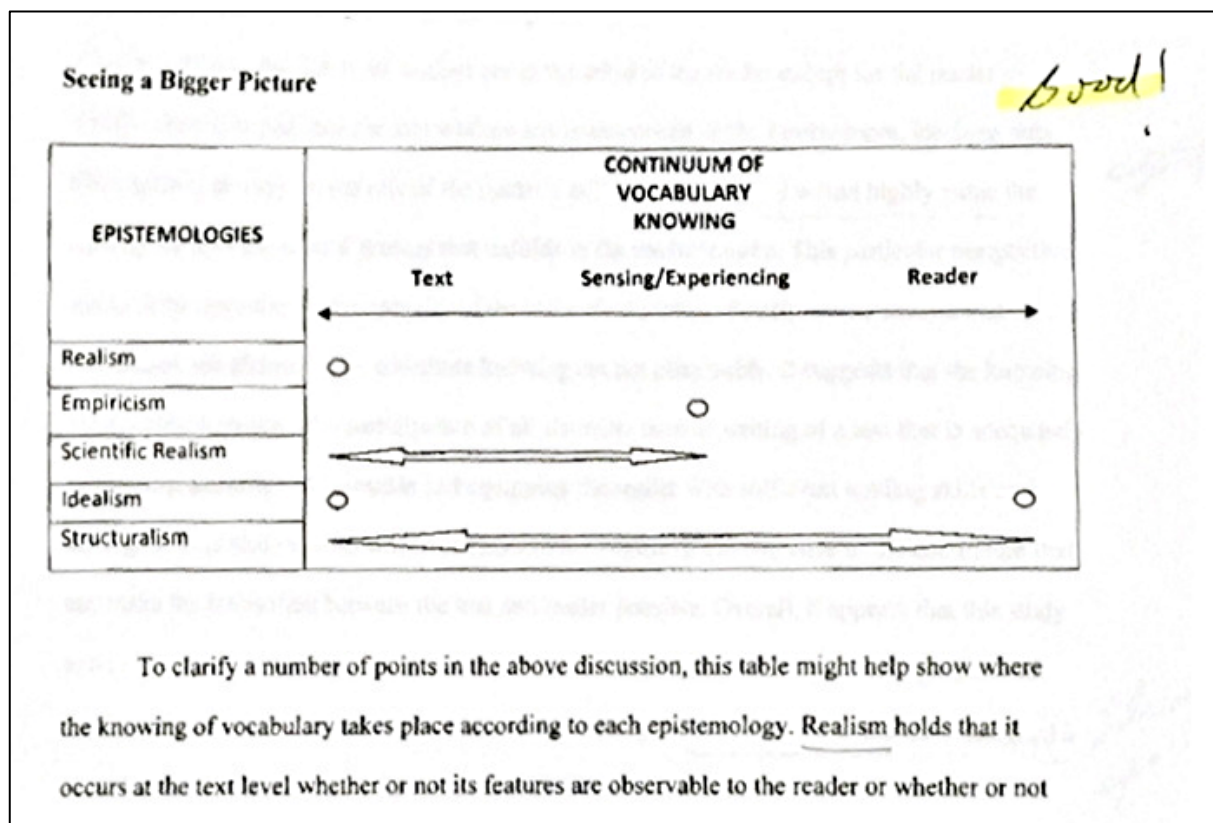

Figure 1. Ibnu's First Essay for the Course.

Ibnu explained his use of a chart in this paper:

> *When I first used the chart, it was just a pure guess that the professor would like it better. Clarity is important for the professor so I just thought that it would be helpful, especially when writing about complex procedures and processes that I included a chart or diagram too. And . . . it worked, the professor liked it. From that day on, I always kept in mind that I need to pay attention to how others*

would read my papers, is it easy for them to understand . . . that kind of things. (Interview)

He guessed what to do based on his understanding of the teacher's values as well as a given assignment. In other words, his guess of the teacher's high priority on clarity underpinned his decision to use a chart. Then, he tried to enhance the "clarity" of meaning. To fulfill this overall goal, he used visual aids in his paper. It turned out to be successful because the professor liked it, which Cox (2010) described as the trial and error process multilingual graduate students employ. In fact, the professor provided Earny and Ibnu with written feedback on their use of diagrams or charts; "Good" and "Fantastic" three times in total. Upon this positive feedback, Ibnu was able to develop a more fine-tuned strategy to act up to this particular teacher's expectation.

The professor's feedback indicated whether his guess was right or wrong. If the assumption was correct, he reinforced the writing practices, while negative feedback would discourage him from using them. Accordingly, the most prominent finding to emerge from the research is that positive feedback plays a more vital role in task representation and, more broadly, academic writing development than faculty might assume. A cycle of this guess-feedback-reinforcement is quite illuminating because this is the very moment when new doctoral students with no or few educational experiences in the United States struggle. The moment is one example of how socialization can take place. Repetitive encounters in various forms with full members of a community like this lead L2 writers to become members of the disciplinary community they are in (Casanave & Li, 2008; Duff, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Adjusting Task Perceptions by Making Informed Choices: "The Expectations There Were Different"

Not only do L2 writers negotiate goals and strategies to complete a task, but they also revise their notions of particular genres in relation to the new context. Even something as seemingly simple as a reading response requires L2 writers to ponder what they are expected to do. Chanwoo recalled:

> *When I was asked to write a reading response for a master's course, I thought that I was supposed to write a summary of the book for the class. That assumption came from my graduate study in my home country. In my graduate years, what I was mainly trained to do was to summarize, and the community valued summarization. But the U.S. professor said, "Please let me know what you think about this book. This is not for a summary." I realized that I was actually supposed to pay attention to specific phrases in the book and to take a position by supporting or rejecting that idea. The expectations there were different from those in my country.* (Interview)

When Chanwoo was required to write a reading response in a new academic setting, he first drew on his prior experience of writing that genre, strictly speaking, a genre with that name, to guess the features of the new genre. He certainly had a starting point for modifying his perception of the genre. Since a genre is "learned in and as social practices" (Kamberelis, 1995, p. 115) and thus emerges with its own purposes and functions to fulfill needs in a given context, it does not necessarily mean that a genre with the same name in two different settings, whether it be cross-cultural or cross-disciplinary, functions the same way. Chanwoo's genre experience in the past—his graduate experiences in South Korea in this case—clearly guided his task recognitions. Flower and Hayes (1981) pointed

out that "sometimes a single cue in an assignment ... can let a writer tap a stored representation of a problem and bring a whole raft of writing plans into play" (p. 371). Chanwoo must have tapped his knowledge of reading responses when he noticed a cue, a reading response in this case. His professor's feedback, however, compelled him to rethink his notion of the nature of a reading response. That is, instead of sticking to his assumption about a reading response, what boundary guarders (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011) would do, he assumed a novice role (Sommers & Saltz, 2004) immediately after he noted a difference in the reading response between the United States and South Korea.

This process of adjusting his definition of the genre was possible because he accepted the ambiguity in the new demand and "repurposed and reimagined" his prior understanding, one of the key features of boundary crossers (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011, p. 325). The surface manifestations of a reading response seemed quite similar, while its underlying purposes originated in two distinct communities were different from each other. Thus, he negotiated the competing concepts of a reading response by challenging his preconceptions. In this process of educated guesswork, he was so flexible that he could adapt his notion of a genre when he noticed a cue that did not support his working hypothesis for this teacher. His negotiation practice demonstrates how L2 writers can expand their genre repertoires (Leki, 2011), one of the clear indications of socialization (Kim, 2016).

Completing academic writing tasks also involves the negotiation of a topic and resources. For example, Ibnu and Earny said that their topic choices were closely tied to the readings and discussions in class, while Earny mentioned that he took his personal experiences into account. Ibnu said, "*Mainly from class materials, not so much from what I am passionate about*" (Interview). Ibnu took a situational factor, the class agenda in this case, more seriously than Earny did. It was noted that Chanwoo and Earny tried to find a topic relevant to their future research questions. That is, each participant decided not only on the factors they would consider for a topic of their papers but also on the extent to which they would focus on each element. Likewise, when they allotted their resources, including the amount of time they would spend on each assignment in different classes, some took the importance of a written product beyond the class seriously, while others took the professor's personality and their course schedules seriously.

For example, Ibnu spent much time on the third assignment because he saw its possibility for the qualifying evaluation in the program beyond the class, which made this task high-stake. In contrast, Chanwoo spent much time on a task for another class because he heard that the professor was "demanding" (Interview). Therefore, although they belonged to the same department and learned from the same professor, their different ways of assigning their resources illustrated how situated literacy practices were (Duff, 2019; Prior, 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991). If they had been in a different class from a different professor with different peers, it might even have made a more significant difference in their writing practices.

Deciding How to Approach the Task: "*I Have to Consider So Many Things*"

The factors affecting the participants' guessing process in this study cover a wide spectrum; what professors value and expect, prior literacy experiences, and resources available, as discussed above. Other factors also kept them guessing and, in turn, determined how to approach a particular task: (1) characteristics of genres and ways to present arguments in the field that they identified from models and (2) audience awareness.

Significantly, all participants read published works for various reasons. Searching for models and examples was found to be a frequently used strategy to deal with the writing demands of disciplinary courses (Leki, 1995; Macbeth, 2010; Tardy, 2006). What they looked for in the published articles was not limited to genre awareness and language. As Earny said, he read academic journals "*to familiarize [himself] with the academic genre and try to use some of the chunks, expressions, phrases and transition in [his] papers*" and "*also use[d] their style of writing in terms of voice, positionality, etc.*" (Email). Ibnu evaluated published works to think through "*what's common and acceptable for that genre*" (Interview) and Chanwoo "*patterns and formats of academic papers*" (Interview). Additionally, Chanwoo was able to diversify his transitions by analyzing transitions in books, articles, and dissertations published in the field. When he started the doctoral program, feedback from his teachers and consultants at the writing center allowed him to notice that he tended to use "*far more transitions in writing than American students*" (Interview). He guessed that his overuse of transitions came from the Korean culture as he observed a similar phenomenon in conversations with Koreans. His guess led him to make conscious efforts to use fewer transitions and more diversified transitions. He recalled that using models was very useful to this socialization process.

Another aspect of academic writing that impacted participants' guesswork emerged from the data analysis: an academic audience for their work. Ibnu reflected on the changes after the semester was over:

> *Since I started learning English, I became more aware of my choices. I became more aware of things, like, I write not just for myself; I write for the audience, very specific audience. I have to consider so many things. When I write a paper here, I tend to restrict, I mean, to have some constraints… That means that I have to look at things that are appropriate, I mean, to decide which things are appropriate and things are not. There are a lot of things I have to consider when I write a paper in the U.S., compared to when I did that.* (Ibnu, Interview)

Notably, all the participants mentioned concepts such as "audience," and "rhetorical choices." They were fully aware that they wrote for very specific audiences and *"audience definitely had a role in writers' decision making"* (Ibnu, Interview). Equally important, the audience for the participants was not limited to the immediate audience, their professor and classmates. Most participants claimed that "audience awareness" was essential in the types of writing in academic contexts. If the instances where they referred to readers implicitly are included, all participants recognized that writing academically necessitated a series of rhetorical choices to meet the expectations of the academic audience and became more aware of the audience as their education progressed. They acknowledged that they had to consider the audience, in a narrow sense that their professors were representative of the field, and in a broad sense, the field as a whole. Expanding the scope of the audience to the larger academic communities can likewise widen the range of writing strategies, thus illustrating a gradual process of learning academic writing. This acknowledgment positions the whole process of guessing, what Ibnu called "a problem-solving" task, at the center of learning academic writing.

To figure out audience expectations at multiple levels, professors and broad academic community, the students used feedback from professors and peers, academic interactions in and beyond campus, and published works in the field. The participants' self-evaluation of their success indicates that the feedback on earlier assignments became the knowledge base for later assignments and beyond class. By engaging with feedback, they were exposed

to "*American style of writing*" (Earny, Email), "*learn[ed] most of the things*" (Ibnu, Interview), and figured out that a professor valued "*westernized rhetoric and paraphrasing properly*" (Chanwoo, Interview). For example, one of the comments by the professor on Earny's paper was "*A bit too much quoting,*" which influenced Earny's citing practices in his later essays. Similarly, Chanwoo also received comments on his second task about the need to paraphrase instead of quoting.

Interestingly, this comment had a lasting effect on Chanwoo's writing, such as his qualifying paper for the following semester. Specifically, he "*was not satisfied with the qualifying paper because [he] did not have enough time to revise multiple times, resulting in a lot of direct quotations*" (Interview). With more time, he "*would have paraphrased more*" (Interview). During the interview, Chanwoo expressed his frustration that his ways of citing others' ideas—"*mostly using quotation marks*" (Interview)—did not conform to the teacher's expectations. The implicit instruction led him to guess, evaluate, and shape his established citing practices. Eventually, this adjusted way of integrating sources in writing became his way of writing. This negotiation process involving educated guesswork clearly shows how learners are socialized into academic writing practices.

Relatedly, factors beyond the classroom came into play in the participants' task perceptions. Ibnu said:

> When I write, I first pay attention to the elements required then look into things that are doable and resources that are available. The strategies I use are very much determined by how much time I have, how busy I am, what teachers' preferences are, and who the teachers are. (Interview)

It is worth noting that Ibnu considered factors mainly determined by his course load and personal life and strategically gave priority to each factor; "*the elements required*" was limited by "*things that [were] doable*" when he was working on a particular task. Different participants had different foci at different priority levels. Each of these factors was considered to varying extents and the range of the subsequent assumptions in each student's mind varied. The participants constantly tried to guess what they were supposed to do with various factors in mind.

Discussion

The findings indicate that advanced L2 writers with prior experiences, even in similar communities to their current institution, engage with guessing and develop their network of resources to get feedback to adjust their interpretations of the task assigned, and negotiate these task representations accordingly. This process of positioning themselves as a novice (Sommers & Saltz, 2004) and the implicit instruction help these students to address academic challenges, including multiple conceptualizations of a task, unfamiliarity of academic genre and content, and vague requirements. Specifically, the participants' capacity to tolerate ambiguity and see challenging tasks as problem-solving, was not a given or a coincidence, but an ability that they developed over the years. This conclusion is evidenced by the participants' statements of the familiarity with academic "*system*" (Ibnu, Interview) and "*patterns*" (Chanwoo, Interview) that they acquired from their master's education.

This observation echoes the characteristics of experts. As Donahue (2012) points out, expert knowledge and skills are embedded in each system. Experts "expect to need to

negotiate, to create hybrids" (p. 152) depending on systems they are involved in. Furthermore, as Donahue suggests, one characteristic of experts is a willingness "to tolerate ambiguity, to learn from others, or to persist even when tasks are difficult" (p. 152). Therefore, this study exemplifies the effect of self-positioning and the notion of "being a novice" (Sommers & Saltz, 2004, p. 134) at the graduate level.

Importantly, looking across the themes, it was extremely hard to separate a guessing element from factors that determine task interpretations. This observation in itself implies that there is a constant guessing game in academic writing, which requires flexibility to address uncertainties through repeated interactions with members of the community. Thus, the findings provide further support for the claim that it is useful to embrace the newcomer status despite their relatively long academic experiences. This flexibility enables student writers to identify "inconsistencies" and actively reconsider assignment expectations, thereby "interpreting ambiguities" (Casanave, 2002, p. xiv), an integral characteristic of "academic writing as a game-like situated social practice" (p. 19). Being flexible enough to reshape established ways of writing was one of the common characteristics of the participants. The combination of their behaviors, willingness to change their definition of a task, consequent frustrations, yet using it as a positive force to negotiate strategies precisely mirrors the features of boundary crossers and novices as experts.

Self-positioning expedited the participants' socialization that was again facilitated through the ongoing process of guessing, trying out different ways, getting feedback, and negotiating practices (Casanave, 2002). Uncertain guess became informed guess through feedback networks involving peers, the teacher, and the writing center, as the participants did. Considering that socialization is about learning to navigate within specific communities, the network of resources on writing about discipline-specific content generates conversations that promote newcomers' entry into a community (Carter, Ferzli, & Wiebe, 2007). Ultimately, the process of seeking such multiple resources through individual networks generated interactions—the type of academic communications that unveil the disciplinary values and beliefs (Kim, 2018a; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2014). Particularly, in the process of guessing, positive feedback was essential to the participants' writing, as they reported, in that they were able to evaluate what they did.

For example, Ibnu started to gain audience awareness when he made "*a pure guess*" (Interview) on the use of a chart in his first essay, as discussed previously. The teacher's feedback enabled him to verify his initial guess on how to improve clarity in writing. More significantly, this was when he began to *"pay attention to how others would read [his] papers"* (Ibnu, Interview). At first, his imagined audience was limited to his course professor. Later, however, it expanded to include broader disciplinary communities of practice, the field of TESOL or applied linguistics. An idea that academic writing needs to fulfill audience expectations—what was once mere guess and then informed guess—became Ibnu's belief; he was socialized into the academic community.

Pedagogically speaking, therefore, it is important to recognize the value of positive feedback, even one simple word such as "Good," or "Nice." It would not be that difficult to provide these seemingly effortless comments to indicate student work meets expectations and norms if they have a profound impact on students' socialization process. This pedagogical implication bears crucial importance for a rookie Ph.D. student since assumptions and expectations must be far less clear than the dissertation writing stage. As Hyatt (2005) argues, feedback is not only for evaluation, but also operates at the

intersections of learning and the process of becoming a member of an academic community.

Finally, the participants reported that the strategy to rely on models was pretty successful. Unfortunately, however, the data suggests that there was a mismatch between how much they wanted models of the target tasks and how many were available to them in class; not many models of the assignments were offered in class. They actively made efforts to understand the nature of academic genres, expectations, academic vocabulary, writing style, and patterns by gleaning information from the existing literature beyond class, which had a great influence on the process of their writing.

Conclusion

This article explores task perceptions of L2 doctoral students and their relationship with academic writing development in the United States through qualitative analysis of interviews, student papers with teacher feedback, and observations. It illustrates ways in which ESL graduate students learn how to conceptualize writing tasks more accurately through the processes of guessing what to do in writing. More to the point, even experienced L2 writers engage in guessing and negotiating task representations in order to complete the writing tasks they are assigned. Specifically, the present study provides a glimpse of how interpreting task assignments and deciphering expectations in a particular disciplinary course is a constant guessing game due to the multiplicity of task representation. This process of guessing leads to informed choices in a specific class, based on their past and current experiences, professor feedback, peer feedback, information gleaned from disciplinary publications, and class readings. The participants addressed the ambiguity of the nature of the subject by assuming a novice role, being flexible, and shaping their interpretations and strategies.

The findings of this study have an implication for academic writing, particularly at the graduate level. It is significant to understand that academic writing development entails not only learning the linguistic repertoires and disciplinary knowledge but also adjusting literacy practices to a target community. This study suggests that a combination of guessing and self-positioning as a novice is a dominant feature of graduate academic writing. From the very beginning of defining a writing task, L2 writers engage in making informed choices, and, subsequently, their task representation moves through varying degrees of uncertainty. This ongoing guessing strategy often involves frustrations and tensions, even for strong writers, as all the participants reported.

Academic writing development is inextricably interconnected with learning specific ways of writing and thinking in disciplines; it is an important part of establishing a scholarly identity. As Hyland (2017) argues, academic English "has nothing to do with topping up generic language skills, but about developing new kinds of literacy" (p. 21). Students put academic writing tasks in an inquiry-based framework within which they guess, identify, articulate, and negotiate what they are expected to do across disciplines, genres, languages, and registers. In this learning framework, feedback and models are essential to academic writing development. After all, although L2 graduate students encounter a number of complications while socializing into task expectations, successful socialization comes through the relative positioning of self and the academic community and implicit instruction.

Thus, it is unreasonable to expect learners to equip themselves with the knowledge and skills which reside in the system before they join that system; readiness is not the only cause of the difficulties L2 graduate writers experience. Considering that a key feature of graduate writing is uncertainties, guessing, and implicit instruction, it is imperative to acknowledge the need for direct writing support for graduate students, in addition to implicit instruction. For example, if the participants had been provided with sample essays along with the guidelines and, ideally, guided through genre analysis of those samples in class, they would have felt less confused and frustrated.

Despite its exploratory nature, this study offers some insight into the socialization process, which is integral to academic writing development by tracing the participants' negotiation practices to complete the tasks. However, the small sample size did not allow me to generalize the findings of this research, in addition to the limited reliability caused by the fact that only a single individual (the researcher) transcribed and conducted the qualitative analysis. Another weakness of this study is that I experienced the target class with the two participants as a student myself. Therefore, the analysis might have reflected my internal bias toward the class or the negotiation of the writing representations, although one might see it as a useful insider perspective.

Moreover, this study is unable to encompass the student population who enters a doctoral program straight from their home countries since all the participants in the study had many years of education in English-speaking countries. Consequently, a complete discussion of L2 graduate writers' literacy practices lies beyond the scope of this research. It would be interesting and valuable to compare the experiences of individuals with no educational background in English-speaking countries and to chronicle a developmental novice-to-experienced process. It is also recommended that further research be undertaken to investigate whether first language graduate students face similar challenges. Task representation may be an issue for them, too, yet a comparative study can yield different findings.

About the Author

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Acknowledgements

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Appendix: Interview Questions

- What strategies do you usually use to understand a writing task?

- Which assignment do/did you find the most difficult or easiest of all the papers for this class? Why?

- In your opinion, what literacy practices of yours come/ came from your cultural backgrounds or personal preferences? When you write/wrote papers for this course, what do/did you find the most difficult and why?

- Why do/did you choose the topic you wrote about?

- What strategies do you use when you write? Do those strategies vary from genre to genre? If so, how different?

- Do/Did you ask the professor to give feedback on the papers before you turn them in? Or have you ever talked about your topic and general ideas of your papers with the professor informally?

- What impact do you think the feedback on earlier assignments have/had on later assignment?

- Have you ever written the types of writing assignments that are/were required to write for this class before? If so, do you think that experience was helpful or inhibiting to interpreting writing tasks in some way?

- When you are required to write an unfamiliar genre, what do you do (what strategies do you use) in order to grasp what that genre would be like?