Academic Identity Construction in Writing the Discussion & Conclusion Section of L2 Theses: Case Studies of Chinese Social Science Doctoral Students

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Abstract

There has been an increasing interest in studying thesis writing genre in the past two decades, however, the study on how social science doctoral students construct their academic identity in L2 thesis writing still remains underexplored to date. This paper attempts to fill the gap by examining the ways in which a cohort of Chinese social science doctoral students constructed their academic identity in the process of drafting, revising, and shaping the Discussion & Conclusion section of their L2 theses. The study adopted multi-case approaches and in-depth interviews. It found that the process of the students’ academic identity construction was fluid and dynamic. These students gradually evolved from novice student writers at the initial stage to more skilled academic writers at the later stage. The findings generated from this study offer significant implications for L2 writing pedagogy in China.

Key words: academic identity construction; writing the Discussion & Conclusion section; implications for L2 writing pedagogy

1. Introduction

Doctoral thesis writing is often viewed as the most difficult and challenging task both for non-native and native English student writers. Difficulties encountered by L2 doctoral students in thesis writing have generated scholars’ increasing concerns in the past two decades. The most recent and detailed research is done by Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) who initiated the probe into the difficulties of the Discussion section writing...
perceived by the L2 doctoral students and their supervisors at two universities in New Zealand. Through their study they found that there emerged an evident mismatch between the supervisors and the students about the nature and cause of the students’ difficulties in writing the Discussion section. Based on interviews with supervisors and graduate students and a detailed analysis of extended pieces of the students’ thesis writing, Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz & Nuna (1998) found that the students had much trouble organizing the thesis in a way which made the objectives, purpose and outcomes of the research transparent to the reader, creating a research space; and they had trouble substantiating arguments with evidence from the literature with tendency to make unsupported claims for research findings. In her study of supervisors and L2 postgraduates in two universities in the US, Dong (1998) reported that approximately a third of the L2 students expressed their difficulties with vocabulary choice while supervisors perceived that L2 students experienced difficulty with the sequencing and development of propositions and with the use of transitions between propositions and topics. Cooley and Lewkowicz (1995) conducted a survey and found that 26% of the L2 students thought that they had serious difficulties in organizing ideas and arguments, using the appropriate style to approach the thesis writing, and expressing their thoughts clearly in English. Powers (1994) had a survey among native and non-native graduate students which yielded the finding that non-native graduate students had major problems with organization, synthesis, and clear, concise, and correct writing. Similar findings have also been reported by Casanave and Hubbard (1992), who surveyed 85 supervisors across 28 departments at Stanford University and found that both native and non-native postgraduate students have main problems with discourse-level aspects of writing. These studies have provided important implications for the research of L2 thesis writing and pedagogy, but they have generally targeted the difficulties of thesis writing as a whole without examining the difficulties of any particular part-genre of thesis writing.

Apart from the study of the difficulties of thesis writing, there has been a growing interest in investigating L2 learners negotiating and constructing writer identity as they approach academic genre writing over the past two decades (e.g., Berkenkotter, Huckin & Ackerman, 1988, 1991; Burgess & Ivanic, 2010; Casanave, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2002; Dong, 1998; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Dressen, 2008; Haneda, 2005; Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Ivanic, 1994, 1995, 1998; Ivanic & Camps, 2001; Li, 2008; Prior, 1998; Riazi, 1997; Spack, 1997; Tang & John, 1999; Tardy, 2005). A typical study is done by Ivanic (1998) who investigated how eight mature postgraduate students learning at the Writing Center of Lancaster University approached academic writing and how their writer identity was constituted within a variety of local social contexts. Previous studies as such have brought to light the socially as well as discursively constructed nature of academic identity which is formed and transformed throughout the writing process. It is no doubt that these studies have made considerable contributions to L2 academic genre writing research. However, some areas still remain underexplored. First, previous studies generally choose Anglo-American universities as their research site with inadequate consideration of other contexts, thus studies with respect to Asian universities being extremely rare (Braine, 2002; Li, 2007). Second, as a large bulk of previous studies direct their attention to
research article genre, the work on L2 doctoral thesis writing is inadequate. This is why L2 doctoral students' thesis writing is still thought to be a neglected genre (Dudley-Evans, 1999; Hyland, 2004; Swales, 2004). Third, while some scholars have touched on the issue of identity involved in L2 doctoral thesis writing in general, research on how L2 doctoral student writers position themselves in the process of writing the Discussion & Conclusion section is rare in the literature. And none of the literature has to date examined this particular part-genre from the perspective of the students’ dynamic writing processes. To address the limitations of the literature, the present study mainly adopted a multi-case approach and in-depth interviews to explore the ways in which a particular group of L2 Chinese social science doctoral students studying at a Hong Kong University constructed their academic identity in the process of drafting, revising, and shaping the Discussion & Conclusion section. Data were collected on the basis of the student writers’ lived experiences in different phases of writing and various versions of their written texts, and analyzed basically in line with genre theory, writer identity construction theory and social cultural theory. It found that the process of these students’ academic identity construction was fluid and dynamic. Throughout the process these students gradually evolved from anovice student writers at the initial stage to more skilled academic writers at the later stage, till moving towards a full member of their discourse community in the final phase. Implications for writing pedagogy within the institutional context will be discussed.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The notion of genre

Genre is generally viewed as a situated social action which is embedded, performed, and accomplished within a specific social context (Bazerman, 1988, 1997; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Devitt, 1993; Freedman & Medway, 1994; Miller, 1984; Myers, 1985; Prior, 1998). It is inherently a dynamic social process which is based in recurring rhetorical situations, situated in everyday micro-level communicative activities, and grounded in the knowledge of readers and writers who co-participate in various communicative activities. It entails particular social communicative purpose of a discourse community, writers and readers, interaction, participation as well as socially constrained text-making conventions. The essential conception is that genre construction and shaping co-occur with construction of writer identity as genres are “forms of life, ways of being” (Bazerman, 1997: 19) In constructing and negotiating the meaning of a genre through communication and interaction, writers can define and redefine themselves simultaneously.

2.2 The conception of writer identity construction

Writer identity, also called academic identity, refers to the positioning or role that writers create in writing as academic community members. It is argued that academic writing is an act of identity as it is integrally connected with a writer’s sense of self (Hyland, 2002; Ivanic, 1994, 1995, 1998; Ivanic & Camps, 2001; Ivanic & Simpson, 1992; Kamberelis & Scott, 1992; Spack, 1997). Through the act of writing, writers “align themselves with
socioculturally shaped possibilities for selfhood” (Ivanic, 1998: 32), develop their discourse self, and place it under continual revision. Their writer identity is constructed and shaped through discursive practice and social interaction. What they write and how they write are simply constrained by the larger disciplinary community with which they are closely associated (e.g., Englert, Mariage & Dunsmore 2006; Prior, 2006). To successfully take on the new identity of the membership of their academic community, writers have to enact discursive practice by aligning with the conventions and norms of the discourse community on the one hand, and engage themselves in various social interactions on the other. According to Ivnic (1998), accommodation to the conventions and norms of the academic community is an important aspect of constructing writers’ identity in the discourse; interacting with the members of the community can both facilitate writers’ inside knowledge in regard to the interests, values, and norms of the community and mediate writers’ identity. Thus, discursive practice and social interaction constitute two key mechanisms for mediating and constructing writer’s particular academic identity in the process of writing. It is through constant discursive practices and social interactions that writer identity can be more favorably invoked. Meanwhile, as a form of social identity, writer identity is also open to constant change and development along with the dynamic mechanisms of both discursive practices and social interactions. Owing to this characteristics, writers tend to assert their academic identity at one particular time and transform it at another time.

2.3 Sociocultural theory

Sociocultural theory seeks to understand how situated meanings of learning are constructed, reconstructed, and transformed through social mediation (Englert et al., 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998; Wertsch, 1991; Wertsch & Toma, 1995). It embraces two principle tenets, namely sociocognitive apprenticeship and participation in communities of practice which are intermingled and co-implicated with theories of situated learning, and zone of proximal development & scaffolding.

The literature about situated learning has brought forth two major theoretical paradigms: Rogoff’s “guided participation” (GP) (1995) and Lave and Wenger’s “legitimate peripheral participation” (LPP) (1991), both of which have produced profound impact on literacy studies. Guided participation, to Rogoff, is a type of participation occurring in learning which is the developmental process of cognitive apprenticeship guided by a caretaker or a mentor and accomplished through various social participation acts. Its central idea is that learners’ cognitive development is inseparable from the social environment which affords them the context of participating in social activities of various forms with the guidance of more skilled practitioners. Legitimate peripheral participation is the expanded notion of situated learning by Lave and Wenger (1991). It is seen as a form of participation in a community of practice wherein newcomers develop their cognition and skills and evolve their membership by engaging themselves in various activities at peripheral locations. It is “a construct that locates learning between the individual and the community” (Prior, 1994: 487) and a process which involves various kinds of apprenticeship whereby learners who are not taking part directly in a particular
activity can learn a great deal from their legitimate position on the periphery. Central to this notion is that learning is an evolving form of membership. Novices gradually move towards a full membership in a given community through interacting with more experienced community members. According to Lave and Wenger (1991: 53), “identity, knowing, and social membership entail one another”. In other words, learners’ identity is intricately entwined with their learning process.

A very important component of the sociocultural theory is the concept of zone of the proximal development (ZPD) posited by Vygotsky (1978). It is viewed as the performance gap between what learners can attain alone and what they can achieve with the support of more experienced peers. According to Vygotsky, there remains a significant distance “between learners’ actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978: 86). Seen through the conceptual line, social collaboration or interaction with more knowledgeable people is the prerequisite that creates and facilitates learners’ zones of proximal development and helps them bolster their actual performance as well as their cognitive potential to a more advanced level.

A similar theoretical assumption closely linked to the conception of the zone of proximal development is the notion of scaffolding. It refers to the guided assistance and support from more experienced persons when novice learners are involved in actual performance. It assumes that with the assistance of more knowledgeable people novices are able to solve the problems of the tasks they are engaged in and are able to promote their cognitive growth and development to a more advanced level. What is implied in such a theoretical notion is that scaffolding needs to be graduated as it involves the process of participation and collaboration of both sides: novice learners and experts. It is through the active participation and collaboration of the two sides that learners’ socio-cognitive skills and knowledge are gradually advanced to a higher level of competence (Englert et al., 2006; Rogoff & Gardner, 1984; Stetsenko, 1999).

3. Method

Multi-case approaches and in-depth interviews were mainly employed in this study to capture the dynamic process of the particular group of L2 social science doctoral students writing the specific Discussion & Conclusion part-genre and to gain their perspectives on their own academic identity construction throughout the writing process. Six cases were chosen and two-round discourse-based interviews were implemented after their first draft submissions and final shaping of the Discussion & Conclusion sections respectively. With such research paradigms, this study attempts to give a description of the significant events relating to the particular phenomenon under investigation on the one hand, and yet, on the other, identify some of the common trends and patterns emerging in the lived stories of the student cases.
3.1 Participants
Six doctoral students of social sciences from mainland China who were pursuing their PhD studies at a university of Hong Kong were targeted on purpose to become the cases of the study. They had rarely been given any explicit instruction or training in English academic writing either on the mainland or in Hong Kong. They were baffled by problems of various kinds in doctoral thesis writing. They were mature students aged 30 on the average. Four were female and two were male. They were either in the third year or in the fourth year of their PhD candidacy. They had almost worked out the initial drafts of their theses when they were solicited. Their final written texts would be done within four or five months. The detailed background information regarding the student participants will be tabulated on the following page (see Table 1). The six students were solicited through the researcher’s personal contact by email and telephone based on the criteria of confidentiality, trustiness, and voluntariness. In her initial contact with the potential case candidates, she assured them of the confidentiality involved in their thesis writing by explaining to them that their real names would not appear in the study. She also clarified that the purpose of the study was simply to obtain information regarding the overall rhetorical structure of the Discussion & Conclusion section in different versions of their theses, their perceptions of thesis writing in general as well as their accounts and perceptions of the major events occurring in the process of constructing and shaping the part-genre writing, which would not concern any of their discipline content. To build a good rapport with the potential candidates, the researcher also promised them that she would provide them hands-on assistance with their thesis proofreading in the subsequent revising periods. She also made it clear that they could withdraw from the study anytime if they were not willing to continue. Guided by the criteria, six doctoral candidates of social sciences from the same school became the six cases of the study, who were named Cong, Mei, Su, Ping, Tao, and Yan as pseudonyms.

Table 1. Background information of the six student cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>English language proficiency test &amp; score</th>
<th>Field of study</th>
<th>Research orientation</th>
<th>Stage of study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cong</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>IELTS/ 7</td>
<td>Business Communication</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Third year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mei</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>TOEFL/619</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Third year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Su</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>TOEFL/631</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Third year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ping</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>TOEFL/570</td>
<td>Asian Studies</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Fourth year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tao</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>TOEFL/610</td>
<td>Public &amp; Social Administration</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Fourth year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yan</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>TOEFL/608</td>
<td>Public &amp; Social Administration</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Fourth year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Data collection
Data collection consists of two parts: textual data and in-depth interview data. Textual data mainly serves as the reference for the subsequent discourse-based interviews and description of the participants’ interview accounts. These data were collected from six social science doctoral students of a university in Hong Kong including original drafts,
revised versions, and final versions of the Discussion & Conclusion sections which totaled 18 texts. The textual data were collected at different stages of thesis writing. The original drafts were obtained during the initial stage of theses students’ thesis writing; the revised texts were collected during the revision period; the final versions were solicited from the students after they submitted their finished texts to their supervisors. The duration of the textual data collection approximated seven months which started from early January to the middle of July of 2008. All the interview data were collected through two rounds of interviews with six doctoral students. The first-round interview questions were based on the students’ original drafts focusing on the process of their initial thesis writing, particularly surrounding what difficulties they were encountered, why they had difficulties, how they negotiated and constructed the Discussion & Conclusion section at an earlier stage, and how they initially constructed their academic identity. The second-round interview questions were designed according to the revised texts and final versions and were directed at the process of revising their thesis drafts and shaping their final versions, in particular, how they negotiated generic conventions for better constructing and shaping the specific part-genre at the revision and shaping stage, and how they reconstructed their academic identity at the interim and later stages. The first round of interviews with the students was implemented soon after the students provided the researcher their original thesis drafts and started from mid January, 2008 and lasted till mid April, 2008. The second round of interviews was conducted after the students provided their revised and final versions which lasted from late April to the middle July, 2008.

Before each of the interviews was conducted, the specific interview guide was e-mailed to the informants so that they could be mentally prepared for the content of the interview. In the course of interviews, the researcher did not ask the questions according to the order of the interview guide but rather focused on the core questions and part of the stage-specific questions in so as to afford the informants ample time and freedom to generate more meaningful, accurate, and in-depth information related to particular phenomena under study. The interviews were generally face-to-face either at the office or in the researcher’s dormitory. The informants could choose either English or mandarin Chinese. All the informants used mandarin Chinese for conversation except for Cong, who preferred communicating in English as he spoke very good English. While the course of an interview was running, the researcher took note of the main points each informant made so as to subsequently double-check with the transcripts. All the interviews were recorded by the voice pen with the informants’ consent. Each interview lasted at least an hour with some cases running up to two hours. The whole duration of the interview data collection was approximately nine months.

3.3 Data analysis

Different versions of the students’ text data were analyzed in line with Swales’ (1990) well-established move-structure for Introductions and Swales and Feak’s move-scheme for Conclusion (2004), which also covers the Discussion section to identify if the students had any problem in their overall rhetorical structure on the one hand, and serve as reference to the subsequent discourse-based interviews, on the other. All the interview data were
transcribed, coded, and then processed through the MAX QDA (Quality Data Analysis) software for further analysis and interpretation. As the interview data were originally in the form of spoken texts, they were all transcribed verbatim into written texts. The interview data from five of the students were translated into English while being transcribed (The interviews with Cong were all in English as mentioned above). Idiomatic expressions were translated into their closest English equivalents. Where English equivalents were not available, the utterances were phonemically translated and then given semantic meaning in English within brackets. The total words for each transcription ranged from 4,000 to 10,000. Then, the interview data were coded based on the researcher’s reiterative examinations of each of the transcribed texts and the pertinence to the central research question as well as to the interview questions. Through reiterative examinations by connecting the research question and interview questions with the major events described in each text, salient themes and common patterns with respect to academic identity construction of these participants in writing the Discussion & Conclusion part-genre were identified and a range of coding categories and subcategories were worked out.

4. Findings

4.1 A novice student writer
At the initial phase of drafting the Discussion & Conclusion section, these doctoral student writers lacked familiarity with academic conventions of the community and had limited social interactions which greatly impeded their pace of entering the new discipline community. Consequently, they failed to live up to the standard of their specific discourse communities. They appeared to be incompetent for manipulating content organization and rhetorical structure. They could not think and write in similar ways as did other academic members of the discourse community; they were thus unable to identify themselves with the community. This undoubtedly resulted in their negative identity construction. Due to these deficiencies, these students demonstrated their writer identities as novice student writers at this stage. This can be indicated in the following description of the participants’ interview accounts as well as in part of their excerpts.

When asked about how they would position themselves in the specific discourse community in drafting the Discussion & Conclusion section, Yan, Tao, Cong, and Ping unanimously responded in a negative manner by labeling themselves as new student writers. Yan commented:

I was absolutely a green hand. You know, before picking up this section writing I seldom got myself immersed in the specific academic conventions nor did I interact much with other academics. When I drafted this section I almost had no idea about what should be exactly written and what format should be used. I took it for granted that this section just means summarizing the major findings of the study. So I did not make it fit in with the academic conventions in terms of content and format. (First interview with Yan, March 24, 2008)
In her recollection of the experience of drafting the Discussion & Conclusion section, Yan related that she simply took it for granted that this section is meant to summarize the major findings of her study. She almost had no idea about what exactly to write about and what format to adopt due to her void of knowledge of the specific academic conventions for writing this section. This is clearly demonstrated in her original draft. At the opening of the draft, Yan ignored presenting a short summary of the overall study and failed to provide a brief review of her research background. She started by depicting a lengthy research background before summarizing the main points of her study, she did not follow the convention when she highlighted her major findings: she failed to closely link all the research questions mentioned in the Introduction, thus leaving two research objectives unfulfilled. As she acknowledged at the end of the interview, she did not make this section fit in with the academic conventions in terms of content and format. No wonder she positioned herself as a “green hand”, that is, a novice student writer.

Tao recalled that when he was drafting this section his mind went blank as he was quite unfamiliar with the academic conventions required and he was not aware of the constraints of the conventions. He just assumed that this section functioned as a summary of the main findings of the study. Therefore, throughout the section he only consolidated his research space by summarizing his research findings without making any further rhetorical moves. He also did not closely relate the research questions posited in the Introductory chapter when he approached this section. Of the four research questions, he only addressed two. Accordingly, he perceived himself merely as a new student writer as he “failed to meet the standard of the discipline community in the initial draft” (First interview with Tao, January 14, 2008).

In the interview with Cong for the same question, he did not hesitate to position himself as a novice student writer at the outset of the interview. He explained that his own ignorance of genre and format, his personal preference of ideas and free writing style, and his unwillingness to talk about genre and format with his supervisor and other academics made him fail to follow the academic conventions in content, format, and structure while drafting the Discussion & Conclusion section. This, in part, showed up in his original draft of this section. In the draft, he hardly linked the three research questions put forward in the Introduction while he discussed the main findings, thus making two unfulfilled, and one partially accomplished. Owing to such incompetence in manipulating the content and rhetorical structure of this part-genre in accordance with the academic conventions at the drafting stage, Cong claimed that he “was a novice student writer for sure” and felt that his initial draft “would never be accepted by the discipline community” (First interview with Cong, March 5, 2008).

Ping also saw herself as a new student writer as she experienced incompetence to manipulate the academic conventions and norms for writing the closing section during her drafting period. She mentioned that when she worked on the drafted version, she was not clear about how to organize the content and structure of the section according to academic conventions. She also acknowledged that she had a big problem in relating this section to the Introduction when she interpreted her research findings so that she left the majority of the research questions unfulfilled. The problem as such, to her, resulted from
her neglect of acquiring academic conventions, her own preference for a free and flexible writing style, and her reluctance to discuss the issues on thesis writing and research with his supervisor and other scholars. These appeared identical to the explanations given by Cong. In her recalling of the drafting experience, Ping seemed quite conscious of her own deficiencies which “kept her far away from the discourse community” (First interview with Ping, April 15, 2008).

4.2 A more skilled academic writer

During the revision period, these doctoral students developed more genre knowledge and became more competent in communicating with the members of their discipline community basically through various social interactions. As such, they were better able to act according to the particular academic conventions and norms of the community when they dealt with the content, structure, and format of the Discussion & Conclusion section. It is simply in the process of revising that they made themselves more familiar with the community’s conventions and practices and built a positive writer identity by positioning themselves as more skilled academic writers. This can be particularly illustrated in the following three cases.

Cong was rather problematic with respect to consistency and format in drafting the Discussion & Conclusion section because of his unawareness of the importance of mastering the academic conventions. He ignored linking the research questions proposed in the Introduction when he discussed and interpreted the research findings. He did not adopt proper format in line with the APA style. While revising this specific section, he went out of his way to consult his supervisor and interact with other academics as well as expose himself to relevant academic journals and on-line theses. Such social interactions not only made him aware that consistency and format are the prerequisite of thesis writing genre but also increased his knowledge of generic conventions and enhanced his academic writing skills. In his revised text of the section, Cong has improved a lot in linking the Introduction and the Discussion & Conclusion sections for discussing his research findings. As is shown in this version, three research objectives were fulfilled, only with one unaddressed. This makes a sharp contrast with his initial draft wherein almost all the research objectives are unfulfilled. Such progress, according to Cong, should be ascribed to his constant negotiation with his supervisor, his initiative to interact and mediate with other academics which made him aware of the importance of consistency and format of thesis writing genre and augmented his knowledge of generic conventions practiced in the academic discourse community. Due to the great progress in revision, Cong perceived himself as a more skilled academic writer. He delineated the experience like this:

When I began to revise my draft, I realized that I still had much trouble in getting myself adapted to the conventional practices regulated in my discipline. To overcome the obstacle, I first negotiated a lot with my supervisor. We often e-mailed each other back and forth discussing the importance of academic conventions and norms required for doctoral thesis writing. After she convinced me of the necessity of the conventional practices in the community, my supervisor suggested me to have more exposure to the disciplinary
conventions through reading academic journals and online theses and conversing with other scholars. So I tried to more frequently expose myself to relevant journals and take the initiative to participate in academic seminars, lectures, and conferences to increase the discipline knowledge and get more familiar with the specific conventions and norms. Once, a famous British scholar, Professor Brown, came over to my school to give a lecture on intercultural communication. I prepared some questions and went to the lecture. As the lecture was over, I asked him some questions and took the chance to talk to him about my thesis research and writing, particularly my basic approaches to the Discussion & Conclusion section. Professor Brown offered me very constructive comments and suggestions. Through different channels of social interactions during the revision period, I learned how to deal with the consistency between this section and the Introduction and how to use appropriate academic conventions and norms for organizing the content and the format of this section. I became more sophisticated in manipulating the consistency, format and other academic conventions and norms. Now I’d like to say I’m a more skilled academic writer. (Second interview with Cong, May 22, 2008)

Tao had similar problems as Cong at the phase of drafting the Discussion & Conclusion section. As Tao knew little about the generic conventions with respect to this particular section, he failed to respond to the research questions set forth in the Introduction when he was interpreting his major research findings nor did he follow the academic conventions as he was organizing the structure of the section. The lack of such elements as contribution, limitations, and direction for future research also affected the quality of his draft. Not until he consciously engaged himself in various social interactions in the process of revising did he come to realize his weaknesses, gain a better mastery of the generic conventions required for this specific part-genre, and become better able to improve the deficits in the drafted section. It was in the course of revising that he rebuilt his writer identity favorably. In his own words, “interacting supervisor, relevant scholars and friends from local universities and elsewhere, I found I grew into a more skilled academic writer” (Second interview with Tao, May 3, 2008).

Like Cong and Tao, Yan also had rather limited knowledge of the generic conventions and was unwilling to interact with the academics including her supervisor in drafting the Discussion & Conclusion section. She delineated too much research background without giving a proper summary of the study at the outset of the draft version. She also failed to closely link the research questions when she discussed the findings. Such deficiencies made the whole section loose and unfocused. On the suggestion of her supervisor, she took special efforts to discuss and negotiate with her supervisor and other academics. Meanwhile, she resorted to relevant published works and theses for modeling. In so doing, she became more aware of the problems, became clearer about how to address these problems, and was subsequently able to revise the section in the light of more appropriate academic conventions. Accordingly, she made amazing progress in the revised version of the specific section. For example, she presented a brief summary of the whole section at its opening instead of giving the lengthy description of the research background; she highlighted and discussed almost all the research findings by responding to the research
questions set forth in the Introduction. Such changes make her revised version much more focused and closer to the discipline conventional standards. To Yan, her constant interactions with her supervisor and other academics throughout the revision period both enhanced her specific genre knowledge and boosted her self-confidence to communicate with the community of her discipline. When asked about how she would identify herself after she went through the revision of the Discussion & Conclusion section, she responded affirmatively that she was “no more a green hand, but rather a more skilled academic writer” (Second interview with Yan, July 14, 2008).

4.3 Moving towards a full membership of the community
As displayed in the interview accounts, these doctoral students constructed and reconstructed their academic identity throughout the process of drafting, revising and shaping the Discussion & Conclusion section. When they drafted this particular section, they severely lacked access to social negotiation and interaction. They acquired little specific conventional knowledge and were unable to write acceptably within the communities of their disciplines. Thus they positioned themselves simply as a novice student writer. During the revising and shaping period, they engaged themselves in various social interactions which enabled them to further develop their knowledge of generic conventions and norms and wield the specific part-genre in a more sophisticated manner. With the development of their genre knowledge and skill, they gradually shifted their identity from novice student writers to more skilled academic writers to the later status of moving towards a full membership of the academic community. Such a gradual transformation of their identity was made along with their growing competence to communicate within the community. This can be illuminated in the cases of Sui, Mei, Cong, and Tao.

Interviewed with the question regarding writer identity construction and reconstruction in the whole process of drafting, revising, and shaping the Discussion & Conclusion section, Su provided this narrative:

Well, in drafting this section, I seldom contacted academics other than my supervisor. I knew little about writing conventions practiced in my discipline. The draft did not fit in with the conventions in terms of content and format. This poor situation made me unable to identify myself with the discourse community. I could just see myself as a novice student writer. To address the limit, I mediated a lot with my supervisor, panel members, and other relevant academics available to me in the subsequent revision. They offered me very helpful suggestions for further improvement. In the act of revising this section, I had particular trouble in interpreting the data in line with the culture of my discipline. I went to the “Bamboo Village” (a collective blog initiated by my supervisor and open to all the interested academics), and my research group’s BBS (a website for us research students to discuss and exchange ideas). I raised my questions and uncertainties in the blog and BBS. Soon I got valuable feedback from scholars both of inside and outside research group. I then used the blog and BBS to have more exchange with my peer members and other scholars discussing relevant issues in greater detail. Such mediations clarified my questions on time, helped me
appropriately interpret my data in line with the academic conventions, and further expanded my thinking. Through revising my thesis, I felt I became a more skilled writer. During the period of revising and shaping this section, I also frequently attended academic lectures and conferences related to my research area, and I actively joined the discussion with the scholars there. Interacting with academics from various sources really helps me a lot! Gradually, I am much more able to maneuver this chapter writing with the increase of discipline knowledge and practices. Now I can say I’ve already entered the community, getting myself to move towards its full membership. (Second interview with Su, April 28, 2008)

It can be seen from this quote that Su’s academic identity was incrementally transformed from a new student writer to a more skilled writer, to one who is moving towards full membership of the community of her discipline after she experienced different phases of the specific section writing. To her, this has much to do with social negotiation and interaction in which she consciously got involved in various contexts. A case in point is that she made use of the access of the local “Bamboo Village” blog and the research group’s BBS to further negotiate and discuss the problem in interpreting her findings, which enabled her to make this part fit in with conventional practice.

The salient attribute exhibiting in Su’s account is also evidenced in other participants’ interview comments. For instance, Tao reported that at the initial drafting stage he just looked at himself as an awkward presenter of his research field, which, to him, is the typical sign of a novice student writer. He was too humble to argue forcefully for the research findings. Later in revising and shaping this section, he learned to interpret his main findings with reference to the literature and relevant theories in line with the academic conventions simply through his particular negotiation with available academics and academics abroad as well as interaction with academic journals. Thus he grew much more competent in tackling this specific part of writing. Now he assumed himself “not only a more skilled academic writer, but a contributor to the community of the discipline” (Second interview with Tao, May 3, 2008) as he further extended the current theories on people’s collective actions in the revised and final versions of the Discussion & Conclusion section. Cong was a similar case. He related that he used to be a humble novice student writer at the early drafting phase because of his ignorance of the conventional practices enacted in his discipline community. Through constantly negotiating with his supervisor and frequently mediating with those relevant academics at the school seminars, at local and international conferences, and interacting with online journal articles and theses in revising and shaping this section, he became much more sophisticated in manipulating its content, structure and format. He not only could “communicate confidently and meaningfully with other scholars of the discipline community, but also successfully entered the community” (Second interview with Tao, May 22, 2008). He no longer viewed himself as a humble new student writer, but rather a contributor to his research area as he worked out a new significant theoretical model on intra-cultural communication in his study. Like Su and Tao, Cong had grown from an initial novice student writer to a much more competent academic writer who was successfully initiated into the community. Mei is still another case who shared similar experience with the above-mentioned participants.
She recalled that at the initial drafting stage she was almost a stranger to the conventional practices of the discipline. During revising and shaping she had constant negotiation and interaction with her supervisor and other related academics through attending research seminars and local and international conferences and resorting to published works and theses. Experiences as such helped her develop the academic knowledge and conventions, made her much more capable to write the specific section according to the academic convention and norms, and more confident and competent in communicating with the community. In contrast to her initial perception, she repositioned herself as a member of the community of her discipline. She explained it like this:

I made initial attempt to draw on the Western “bargaining theory” to discuss the major research findings in shaping the final version of this particular section. It yields important theoretical implications for the research in my discipline. Now I would never define myself as a novice academic writer as I’ve become a member of the community. (Second interview with Mei, May 1, 2008)

5. Discussion

This study mainly explored how Chinese social science doctoral students, in their L2 thesis writing, constructed their academic identity at different stages of writing the Discussion & Conclusion section. Major findings yielded basically thorough detailed in-depth interview data analysis of the six student cases. As presented in the above section, the process of drafting, revising, and shaping this specific part-genre which this particular group of doctoral students experienced turned to be both fluid and dynamic. It was in this process that these students underwent a gradual transformation of their academic identities, namely, from novice student writers at the initial drafting stage to more skilled academic writers at the revision stage, to the identities of ones who are moving towards a full membership in the community at the final shaping phase. Such findings can be interpreted in the light of social-cultural theory as well as the notions of genre and writer identity construction.

A fundamental point that is implicated in the notions of genre and writer identity construction is that writer identity is constructed and reconstructed along with mixed, fluid, and dynamic discursive practice and social interaction which appears to be in line with the basic core of social-cultural theory. This mixed, fluid, and dynamic nature of writer identity construction is actually well indexed in the actual experiences of the six student writers who went through different stages of writing the Discussion & Conclusion section.

As manifested in their interview accounts, these students were all newcomers to their discipline communities when they approached the Discussion & Conclusion section at the initial drafting stage. Both their genre knowledge and their access to social interactions were limited to the degree so much so that they could not construct this specific part-genre in accordance with their discipline conventional practices. As a result, they were “kept
far away from the discourse community” (original words from Ping) unable to identify themselves with the academic members of the community. Thus they perceived themselves as novice student writers. Such a negative positioning of the students’ writer identities has been theorized by Gerholm (1985) and Wenger (1998). According to Gerholm (1985), any person who enters a new group with the desire of becoming a competent member must learn to comply with its cultural rules, otherwise their standing within the group will be affected. Seen in this light, the student writers’ initial failure in drafting the Discussion & Conclusion section in line with proper academic conventions or expectations undoubtedly affected the way they position themselves within their specific discipline community. As they were incompetent in manipulating academic conventions or rules in approaching this particular part-genre, they were fully aware that they could not be accepted as academic members by the community. For this reason, they perceived themselves negatively within the community. This can also be explained by drawing on Wenger’s view (1998). To Wenger, when learners come into contact with new practices of the discipline community, they venture into an unfamiliar territory. It is through confronting the unfamiliar territory that their identity of non-membership is shaped (p.153). This is true for these student writers who were still strangers to their discourse community during the drafting period. Although they tried to explore the unfamiliar territory of the community through discursive practices, they found themselves rather incompetent in generating appropriate texts as they lacked the familiarity with the academic conventions. They were conscious that they had not as yet become academic members of the discourse community but simply uninhibited student writers. Therefore, they constructed their academic identity in a negative manner.

In the act of revising the Discussion & Conclusion section, the student writers consciously sought opportunities to mediate with other academics including their panel members, professors both within and outside of the university, and the scholars who were invited to give lectures or who were present at conferences. The students’ conscious mediation actions formed multi trajectories of social interaction, involvement, and participation which, to a great extent, accelerated their process of acquiring discipline conventions for further improving the Discussion & Conclusion section and facilitated their writer identity transformation. We can interpret this through the lens of genre theory and social-cultural theory, both of which assert that literary artifacts such as texts and genres are socially mediated and negotiated products which are constructed and reconstructed through a set of social activities (Vygotsky, 1978; Leont’ev, 1978; Cole & Engestrom, 1993; Engestrom, 1987, 1999; Bazerman, 1988; Russell, 1997). In line with a theoretical framework, these doctoral students experienced various discursive practices and social interactions in revising the Discussion & Conclusion section basically through different local community interactions as well as literacy activities. Equally important is that they had a kind of guided and legitimate periphery participations and social scaffoldings from their supervisors and other relevant academic experts available to them which created and facilitated their zone of proximal development and helped improve their actual performance as well as their cognitive potential to a more advanced level. Accordingly, they had a better control of the conventional generic knowledge for this
specific part-genre writing and were able to reposition themselves in a more favorable fashion.

It is well acknowledged that becoming a full member of the discourse community entails the competence to observe the conventions and norms enforced in the community and communicate within the community (Hyland, 2000; Ivanic, 1994; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Sfard, 1998; Swales, 1990; Wenger, 1998). As a matter of fact, gaining a full membership appears to be a gradual process of academic literacy development and writer identity transformation. Learners who aspired to enter the academic community must undergo the process of academic literacy acquisition and graduation of membership whereby their writer identities are gradually developed and transformed. So far as the doctoral students are concerned, they experienced a gradual process of drafting, revising, and shaping the Discussion & Conclusion section. In going through the process, they engaged themselves in various kinds of social negotiation, mediation, and interaction with their supervisors and other academics available to them in different social contexts. Gradually they acquired the particular academic conventions and knowledge and wielded the knowledge in a much more sophisticated manner which enabled them to approximate a full membership in the academic discourse community. Simultaneously, these students developed a strong sense of membership of their academic discourse community. For instance, when asked about their perception of their repositioning in the community during the revising and shaping periods, all the students responded by claiming themselves as an academic member who has been successfully initiated into the discipline’s academic community. This is quite in contrast to their initial view of themselves which was rather negatively constructed. The transformation of these students’ academic identity was quite in evidence throughout the process of their discursive practices and social interactions. From the perspective of situated learning theory, the whole process of the students’ drafting, revising and shaping the Discussion & Conclusion section is also the process of situated learning which “is not merely a condition for membership, but is an evolving form of membership” (Wenger, 1998: 53). Along with the development of their genre knowledge and the increase in their discursive practices and the social interactions, these students redefined themselves and transformed their academic identity from novice student writers to more skilled academic writers moving their the status towards a full member of the community. This, indeed, constitutes the overarching theme which surfaces throughout the whole study.

6. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for the current L2 writing pedagogies both in China and elsewhere. First of all, given that L2 learners’ writer identity is co-implicated and developed with text production, the role of the individual writer’s agency in the act of writing should not be downplayed. Institutional practitioners, particularly supervisors, should draw adequate attention to the issue of doctoral students’ writer identity construction throughout the process of their thesis writing. They should
guide their students to build their academic identity in a positive fashion at the outset of thesis writing rather than wait until later. As implicated in the students’ interview narratives, an important factor that affects positive construction of the students’ writer identity is their lack of their knowledge of academic conventions and norms which made them unable to identify themselves with the discipline’s discourse community when they drafted the Discussion & Conclusion section. They were baffled by the main problems of rhetorical structure inconsistency, improper format, and the inappropriate approach to interpreting findings. To address the deficiency, supervisors should get the students immersed in their discipline’s conventional rules and practices through explicit instruction, once the doctoral students embark on the academic journey. Organizing seminar on different aspects of thesis writing would be helpful for the students. It can make the students not only aware of the importance of observing the conventional academic culture in doctoral thesis writing, but also clear about the basic approaches to different parts of thesis writing. It might be beneficial as well to encourage the students to get more exposure to academic journals related to their research field. The benefits of interacting with academic journals for the student cases in this study were particularly mentioned by Cong, Tao, Yan, Ping, who consciously employed this source to familiarize themselves with the specific conventions and norms required for writing the Discussion & Conclusion section. Seen from the commonly shared conception of scaffolding, legitimate peripheral participation and guided participation, the novices’ cognitive growth and current skills and knowledge can be developed into a more advanced level if they are assisted, guided, and scaffolded by more experienced and knowledgeable persons like supervisors (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Englert et al., 2006; Rogoff & Gardner, 1984). Being newcomers who are to enter the discipline’s discourse community, student writers need their supervisors to create a legitimate zone of proximal development and provide effective scaffolding as well as guided participation to get familiar with the academic conventional knowledge and practices so that they are able to “talk their talk, walk their walk”. After all, doctoral thesis writing is a very conventional genre which has its own particular generic conventions for communicating with the specific academic discourse community members. Guiding students to accommodate and assimilate the generic conventions when they approach thesis writing is perceived not only to facilitate their advanced academic writing ability but also to accelerate the process of their gaining community membership (Berkenkotter et al., 1988, 1991; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Charney & Carlson, 1995; Herrington, 1992; Dong, 1998; Riazi, 1997). Therefore, it makes much sense for supervisors to offer the novice student writers explicit academic instruction in the form of a seminar to enquire them to get more exposure to relevant academic resources in advance rather than delaying until they start writing the thesis and encounter much trouble. In so doing, the novice student writers can speed up the pace of acquiring the discipline’s knowledge and skill as well as approximating entrance into the discourse community. They are able to construct a positive writer identity at the beginning of thesis writing, which, in turn, would further facilitate their advanced academic literacy acquisition.

Another significant pedagogical implication is concerned with the pivotal role
played by social interaction in the process of students’ writer identity construction and reconstruction. As discussed in the previous literature, social interaction, mediation, and negotiation are simply the prerequisite of getting the novices to be initialized into their discourse community and moving towards its full membership (e.g., Belcher, 1994; Duff, 2010; Haneda, 2005; Hyland, 2000; Morita, 2004; Spack, 1997; Wenger, 1998). Both the literature and this study index mediating with other academic scholars is critical in enculturating novice student writers into their target discourse community. Seen in the light of social cultural theory, learning is a socially situated process whereby newcomers gradually move towards fuller participation in a given community’s activities through interacting with other experienced community members in the form of legitimate periphery participation and guided participation. The student participants’ involvement in academic lectures, seminars and conferences is the instantiation of enacting their legitimate periphery participation in the social practices with those more knowledgeable community members other than their supervisors. It is through this particular form of participation that they obtain much more needed scaffolding and guidance for their ultimate discipline discourse enculturation. From the lens of social cultural theory, taking mediative actions with the experienced community members plays a critical role in making learners more competent in gaining the craft of the discourse community. Mediating with such academics as panel members, professors within and outside of the university, scholars in the seminars and conferences not only affords students the opportunity to be acquainted with the professional conversations in the field (Bazerman, 1988), enhances their awareness of the “codification” of the discipline (Geisler, 1994), but also increases their competence to communicate with their discipline discourse community. In consequence, along with the development of their academic competence, their community membership can be evolved over time and their writer identity can be transformed in a much more favorable fashion. All this is well evidenced in the six student cases. One of the cases in point is Cong who took the chance to dialogue with the famous British scholar, Professor Brown, about his major questions and problems concerning the thesis writing when the scholar came for a guest lecture; another typical case is Su who made full use of the local blog, “Bamboo Village”, and research BBS to deliberate with the academics both inside and outside of her research circle about her doubts and uncertainties on data interpretation and other issues concerned with the specific thesis section writing. It is revealed in the study that social interaction determines L2 writers’ successful discourse socialization which is intermingled with positive writer identity construction and reconstruction. In view of this overarching role of social interaction, supervisors and other school practitioners should assume the responsibility to open more avenues for student writers to interact and negotiate with other academics. They may introduce their own academic network to their students, or encourage their students to actively participate in research seminars, lectures, and conferences related to the specific discipline as much as possible. In the meantime, they might provide detailed guidelines for the students to more actively engage themselves in such social opportunities. With such open though guided social access, the novice L2 writers will greatly facilitate their own advanced academic literacy acquisition and boost their confidence in communicating...
with the academic community, thereby making them feel like insiders of the community, moving towards gaining its full membership.

Notes

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2. IELTS refers to International Language Testing System. The highest score of the test is 8.5. TOEFL refers to Test of English as a Foreign Language. The highest score of this test, according to the standard prior to the recently updated one, is 680. The minimum requirement of English language proficiency for any PhD applicant who wants to enter the doctoral program of the key universities of Hong Kong is 6 for IELTS and 550 for TOEFL. These students turned out to be intermediate or upper-intermediate level learners so far as their English language proficiency was concerned.

3. Cong holds both a bachelor degree and a master degree of Applied Linguistics granted by the Department of English, Henan University, mainland China.

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