Problems and Strategies in Learning to Write a Thesis Proposal: A Study of Six M.A. Students in a TEFL Program

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Abstract

This study explored how six graduate students of a TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) program learned to write their MA thesis proposals in English in a graduate course. Multiple sources of evidence were collected, including questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, and presentation profiles. Data analyses showed that the students encountered difficulties in selecting a research topic, designing the proposal research, grasping the genre of the thesis proposal, and doing a critical literature review, but varied in their attitude toward getting support from their supervisors. By holding discussions with their supervisors, observing their peers’ presentations on research proposals, and reading relevant literature, they eventually completed the writing of their research proposals.

Key words: graduate students; thesis proposal writing; coping strategies

1. Introduction

Thesis writing is of great importance for graduate students. Through the process, the students come to know how to do research and report the findings. Research proposal writing is the first step for graduate students to take. As Behling (1984: 2) indicated, “the proposal is a study plan that is to be followed in the course of the research effort” and “it gives continuity to the various steps and stages of the work to be done.” Besides, proposal writing, as a preparation of research, helps students gain an important focus of their studies and find the direction to proceed (Paltridge, 1997).
For graduate students, the approval of a proposal may either help to obtain funding for research or permission to embark on a thesis study in certain fields. In this sense, its completion is actually the starting point of future study. However, the process of writing a proposal is difficult for novice graduate writers who have little experience in academic writing, especially those having to write in their second language (L2). There might be some depressive feelings or self-negation resulting from ambiguous knowledge of research fields or difficulties encountered in the academic discourse community, such as in negotiating with supervisors and holding discussions with peers. Problems in this writing process may vary from person to person. However, this process could be a real “growth experience” and “self-development” (Krathwohl, 1988: 239). Despite the importance of proposal writing, a limited number of studies have examined the process of learning to write a thesis proposal, particularly in a L2.

Over the past two decades, many studies on academic writing investigated writing practices in a situated learning context (Juzwik et al., 2006). Particularly, there is a growing interest in how ESL (English as a second language) graduate students acquire English academic writing literacy in completing a variety of writing tasks such as a science report, journal paper, thesis or dissertation. These studies cover a range of topics such as problems and difficulties graduate students encounter in acquiring academic literacy (Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz & Nunan, 1998; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Paltridge, 1997; Zuber-Skerritt & Knight, 1986), socialization of novice writers into academic disciplines (Carter, Ferzli & Wiebe, 2007; Garcia & Nelson, 2003; Li, 2007), different educational, cultural and linguistic influence on students’ academic writing (Flowerdew, 1999; Hanson, 2000), impact of supervision on graduate students’ writing, and strategies students adopt to manage writing tasks (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Belcher, 1994; Dong, 1998; Dysthe, 2002). Writing demands on ESL students were found to vary across the curriculum. Learning to write in one’s discipline involves not only the acquisition of English academic literacy but also the conventions and values in one’s discipline.

Although research on graduate students’ academic writing practice in ESL learning contexts has enhanced our understanding of disciplinary writing, there are still some underexplored areas. First, previous research focused on the structure of individual chapters of the thesis and dissertation writing or rhetorical moves in individual section of the research articles (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Bunton, 2005; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Yang & Allison, 2003). Few studies investigated graduate students’ difficulties and growth in the process of thesis proposal writing. Second, previous studies centered on how graduate students learn to write in the disciplines of science, technology, or business (Zhou, 2004), whereas little attention has been given to graduate students in the field of linguistic and language education. Third, most participants in previous studies were native English speakers or non-native English speakers who were studying in universities of English-speaking countries. Therefore, limited knowledge is available on how students of English as a foreign language (EFL) learn to write in academic English. Fourth, most previous studies in Mainland China examined writing processes, written products, classroom instruction, or the influence of L1 on L2 writing of undergraduate students (e.g., Wang & Wen, 2002; Wang & Wen, 2004; Wen & Guo, 1998). Some studies on graduate students explored how
non-English majors meet the demand of publishing one or more academic papers in well-known international journals (Li, 2007). Little attention is given to how graduate students majoring in English develop their academic English writing competence in EFL contexts. Compared to undergraduate students, limited academic writing courses are available to graduate students in many universities in China. In fact, many graduate students learn to write in academic English in the process of writing a thesis (or dissertation) or research paper for publication as part of their graduate program. To have a better understanding of EFL graduate students’ acquisition of English academic writing competence, this study investigated the experience of six EFL graduate students learning to write their proposals in English. In particular, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What difficulties did the six graduate students encounter in the process of writing their thesis proposals?
2. How did the six graduate students approach the difficulties in writing their thesis proposals?

2. Situated Learning Theory and Relevant Research

This study was under the guidance of situated learning theory (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991), emphasizing that learning happens through social interaction and collaboration with other members in communities of practice. Communities of practice are “groups of people who pursue a shared enterprise and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly with each other and with the world” (Wenger, 1998: 45). In the process of learning, newcomers learn to become members of an academic community through the process of legitimate peripheral participation in different activities within communities of practice. As the newcomer or novice moves from the periphery to the center of a community through the observation of masters, interactions with them and practices by himself or herself, he or she is more engaged and active in the community, gradually takes “full participation”, and finally becomes a legitimate member of a community.

A number of researchers adopted situated learning theory in their studies on academic literacy development. For example, Belcher (1994: 23-34) examined the experiences of three ESL graduate students writing their dissertations, finding the mismatch between students’ and their advisors’ understanding of the purpose of dissertation writing which hindered students from fully engaging in academic literacy practices in their disciplines. Dong (1998), by surveying 169 ESL graduate students and their advisors about their dissertation writing in science, found that ESL students were weak at communicating with their supervisors and peers and at seeking external help in the process of doing research as well as writing about research. Belcher (1994) and Dong (1998) illustrated the importance of collaboration between supervisors and students in helping students fully participate in the research community and develop academic literacy competence. Consequently, a few researchers attempted to explore the ways of helping novice researchers become legitimate members of an academic community. For example, examining three supervision models in graduate students’ practice of completing...
their writing tasks, Dysthe (2002) indicated the importance of fostering student identities as both independent researchers and team players in this learning process. Garcia and Nelson (2003) reported that professional dialogues designed to prepare doctoral students for their thesis proposals greatly encouraged students to participate in discussion with peers and legitimate members of the community (here professors). In brief, the successful completion of any academic writing task requires students to understand expectations or requirements of the particular academic community. This understanding is gained through students’ full participation in the community of practice by interacting with supervisors, experienced researchers, peers, and with other useful writing resources.

In the present study, while developing their thesis proposals, the students could not isolate themselves from their research community. During this process, they needed to negotiate with their supervisors about their progress and difficulties in writing. In the process of preparing thesis proposals, the students would learn to solve problems and develop their skills of academic writing and experiences of conducting research through their interactions and negotiations with other members within the community of practice. They would then gradually move from the peripheral participation to full participation in their research community.

3. Methods of the Study

3.1 Context
This study took place in an academic writing course for the first year MA students in a TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) program in a major university in Beijing. The course lasted for 16 weeks with two hours per week over the two semesters for the purpose of helping students find their research topics and initiate proper research designs for their MA theses. Students were required to give two rounds of presentation. They presented their research topic and gave tentative research questions and justifications for their research in the first presentation. They then further developed their rough ideas into a research design, and presented them in their second presentation. Each presentation lasted about 10 minutes, followed by the questions from their classmates and suggestions from the course instructor. The students were encouraged to negotiate with their supervisors about their proposals before and after their presentations. Finally, they submitted their revised proposals to the instructor at the end of the course.

3.2 Participants
The participants in this study included six students from the writing course and their supervisors. The students were referred to as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6, while their supervisors were referred to as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5 and T6 correspondingly. Table 1 presents the profiles of the student participants, including their age, gender, proposed research areas, and teaching experience. S3 was the only male participant. S1, S2, S3 and S4 did not have any full-time teaching position prior to their graduate studies. S5 was an English teacher for adult students in a training center for two years. S6 was a middle school English
teacher for 10 years. None of them had conducted research or published any research articles either in Chinese or English. Thus, they could all be considered novice writers in terms of academic writing.

Table 1. Profiles of the student participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Proposed research areas</th>
<th>Teaching experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Comparative study of English and Chinese writing</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Listening comprehension</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Reading ability</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>English pronunciation</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>English writing</td>
<td>2 years at an English training center (adults)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Comparative study of English and Chinese</td>
<td>10 years of teaching English in middle school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 presents the profiles of the six supervisors. They were all experienced researchers and instructors in the field of linguistics, applied linguistics, corpus linguistics, language testing, second language education, or comparative study of English and Chinese. T4 was both a supervisor of S4 and an instructor of an academic writing course. Due to the course requirements, the students had many opportunities to have discussions with their supervisors before and after their presentations. Each supervisor helped his or her student go through the process of proposal writing from specifying research questions to designing the research and drafting the research proposal.

Table 2. Profiles of the supervisors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Supervisee</th>
<th>Areas of specialization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>S1</td>
<td>Corpus linguistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>60s</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>Applied linguistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>S3</td>
<td>Language testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>Applied linguistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>S5</td>
<td>Second language education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>S6</td>
<td>Comparative study of Chinese and English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Data collection
To detect the students’ problems and coping strategies in the process of learning to write a thesis proposal, a case study approach was adopted (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). Interviews and the students’ written proposals and handouts were collected from the writing course. Each student was interviewed twice, each about 35 minutes. The first round of interviews was conducted in the middle of the semester after the participants had finished their first presentations. This round of interviews aimed to detect a) students’ problems in the process of writing a thesis proposal, b) negotiation with their supervisors and interaction
with peers, and c) specific writing difficulties in each sections of the thesis proposal. The second round of interviews was conducted at the end of the semester after the participants had finished their second presentations; they were to obtain information on students’ further development of their proposals and difficulties encountered in this process. With the student participants’ permission, we obtained two copies of their proposal handouts which were distributed in class as references to their presentations and one copy of their final proposals. Each student was also asked to complete a questionnaire at the end of the course about their overall perceptions of writing difficulties and their self-evaluation on their process of writing research proposals. Moreover, each supervisor was interviewed about 20 minutes at the end of the course to learn about his or her understanding of the purpose and requirement of proposal writing and perception of the difficulties experienced by his or her supervisee in proposal writing.

3.4 Data analysis
The interviews, which served as the major way of data collection in the present study, were transcribed verbatim in the original languages used (Chinese or English). In the excerpts below, italics stand for the utterances made by the participants originally in Chinese, which we translated into English, whereas regular font represents the utterances given by the participants originally in English.

A coding scheme was developed to analyze the interviews with the student participants. Three major categories were borrowed from Steinberg (1981), including “problems about the proposal”, “problems about oneself”, and “problems about the interaction with others in the research community”. The subcategories were modified from Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) based on our current reading of the transcripts. Table 3 gives the definitions and examples for each subcategory. In contrast, the interviews with the supervisors were analyzed according to the two themes of their perceptions of proposal writing and their comments on their supervisees’ performance in the process of composing a proposal.

The written proposals were analyzed according to Behling’s (1984) framework of research proposals. The major rhetorical moves in each proposal, such as the introduction, the research questions, literature review and methodology were identified first and then were used to verify the analysis of the interview transcripts.

Table 3. Coding scheme for student interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major categories</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problems about the proposal</td>
<td>Topic choice</td>
<td>How to set the research scope and specify the topic and research questions</td>
<td>I really struggled a lot to set my research questions. (S1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Design of proposal</td>
<td>Procedures of the study and instruments used (e.g., doing a pilot study, selecting participants, preliminary analysis of the raw data, etc.)</td>
<td>At present, the most difficult thing is to design the test and to find participants. (S2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Findings and Discussions

The data analysis showed that, in the process of writing thesis proposals, the six students confronted different difficulties and accordingly developed different coping strategies. The difficulties that they encountered covered two major aspects such as problems about proposal writing and about oneself.

4.1 Students’ difficulties in writing thesis proposals

4.1.1 Problems about proposal writing

In writing the proposal, the students mainly had problems in determining the research topic, making a feasible research design, organizing their writing logically, and giving a critical review of previous studies, and having sufficient theoretical knowledge.

(1) Topic choice

It was not difficult for the six students to find their own research interests. Nevertheless,
they varied in the process of narrowing down the research topics and defining the research questions. For example, S1 could not figure out the research questions:

I really struggled a lot to design my research questions…Later maybe I will make changes, because they are not quite reasonable and have some drawbacks. And it is difficult to do. It takes time and I need further reading. (Interview with S1)

S2 and S4 chose to do research related to their personal interests and life experience. S2 got interested in pragmatics from a course on linguistics during her undergraduate study. S4 was interested in the relationship between musical aptitude and English pronunciation, coming from her own experience of learning to play piano and speak English in her childhood. However, both of them found it difficult to have a research focus and form specific research questions. S4’s words well illustrated this struggle:

It is really difficult to set the research questions…I have changed them numerous times. One of the things that keep me awake at night is how to form the research questions. (Interview with S4)

S3 got the research topic from his supervisor. However, the topic was too general to handle. He had slow progress to decide what to investigate and changed his topic several times. In his words,

My supervisor gave me this topic…The most struggling moment for me is how to narrow down my topic and how to form the final topic, because usually it will take me much time to think about what is the real purpose of my supervisor. (Interview with S3)

S5 felt lost and did not know how to go on with another study after the first presentation, because the class commented on her research topic as of little significance and hard to carry on. Later, she happened to get an idea from the class discussion.

The most difficult part is finding a research topic. Sometimes you feel that you have got it. But you might change it in the future…The major difficulty is to find what you are going to write [about]…So I had many research questions starting with “will”, because I don’t know what kinds of results I will get. (Interview with S5)

The six students chose the research topics in which they were interested. Although S3’s topic was given by his supervisor, he admitted that he was interested in the topic. They all experienced some difficulty in specifying research topics and forming research questions.

(2) Research design
Making a feasible research design was really a challenge for these students, who had never previously conducted academic research. Due to different research fields, their problems in this aspect were diverse. S1 and S6 would use corpora to perform their studies. Their
problems were either in dealing with the raw data, teasing out the features in those texts to make the comparison between English and Chinese, or in selecting the appropriate data. S6 had difficulty in selecting a parallel corpus in both English and Chinese for comparison. She said,

It is the biggest problem at the moment. My study is on the comparison between two languages, but the corpus that can be used for the comparative analysis is not [a] parallel corpus. So this is the biggest problem I have now. (Interview with S6)

S2, S5, and S3 confronted the same problem of designing tasks and finding their participants. For example, S5 needed to find a native English speaker to do reformulation for students’ compositions. She expressed the difficulty to her supervisor, friends, and classmates and worried as to whether she could do it as she planned for a very long time. In her words,

It is difficult for me to find one (a native English speaker), and [to decide] how to pay him, and also how to find participants. If I can find participants, the difficulty is…how I can record their discussions. (Interview with S5)

In contrast, S4 was quite confident in her study. She had no difficulty in finding her participants. However, she admitted that the weakness of her proposal was the research design. She explained that:

The most struggling moment is that I have to design a pronunciation test and [a]…rhythm test. I couldn’t sleep well at night and usually wake up at three o’clock. And I spend two hours like this thinking about what kinds of items I shall add or [if it] is going to be valid or not. And I even dreamed about it. The deadline is approaching, so it is a challenge. (Interview with S4)

(3) Structure and organization

As they had little training in academic writing, the students found it challenging to organize literature and relevant information in a clear and logical way in writing. “Logic” was a frequently mentioned word in their interviews to express their difficulty in writing. For example, S1 felt it hard to find the logical connections between so many relevant studies:

In my literature review part, there are so many studies I listed here. After I looked at it closely, I found little logic between them…During my reading I did some notes but not very much. It challenges my logical way of thinking. And I have to conclude them. I think the most difficult thing is to sort out my ideas and have a clear mind and to know how to move on step by step. (Interview with S1)

Similarly, S2 reported her problem in arranging relevant literature in a reasonable and powerful way. She considered it the most difficult to do in the actual writing process. S6
was also annoyed about how to organize the materials:

I think it is difficult to summarize the research. I have a lot of references but I haven’t sorted out which one is the most relevant. It is difficult to organize the information…I don’t know what is the best way to put them in order. (Interview with S6)

In the current study, due to the requirements of the course, the participants were allowed to present the outline of their proposed studies in class and submit their complete proposals at the end of the semester. Therefore, during the interviews, most of them were still in the process of making a clear research design and writing a literature review. The students all expressed their difficulties in organizing previous studies logically with regard to their own studies.

(4) Critical review

Academic English writing required writers to be critical and logical in expressing personal ideas. ESL students are observed to have difficulty in expressing their ideas critically (Atkinson, 1997; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996). The students in the present study also encountered this difficulty. S1 and S2 explained their difficulty in expressing their own ideas critically in their writing. S1 reported that:

It is very difficult to justify my study. Word choice will express what I am thinking of. So I have to choose from many words precisely and sometimes I worry about the writing of my thesis, because I have to speak my voice in a precise way. If I make some mistakes, I will put myself into trouble. (Interview with S1)

S3 and S5 also found it hard to synthesize previous studies, let alone gave critical comments. S6 expressed that “for bibliography, you must decide the value in it and why you use it in your thesis. It is not so easy to do that.” S4 did not think it difficult to express her own ideas, but she was reluctant to do writing and felt it hard to find the correlation between what she read and her own study. She said that:

I don’t think it is difficult for me to actually do it, but the difficulty is that I don’t want to do it. I read a lot of literature and it is really overwhelming to synthesize them. (Interview with S4)

This finding supports Angelova and Riazantseva’s (1999) observation that ESL students were reluctant to criticize previous studies and state their own positions in academic writing. The participants in this study were in an EFL context rather than an ESL context. They might not feel as strongly about the differences in academic writing between Chinese and English as those ESL students did. In this study, the supervisors tried to foster the students’ critical thinking ability; the student participants also realized their weakness in critical thinking. But, it really took time for them to learn to review previous studies with their own ideas.
Problems and Strategies in Learning to Write a Thesis Proposal: A Study of Six M.A. Students in...

(5) Theoretical knowledge

Insufficient knowledge about relevant theory also hindered them from developing their research proposals. With limited theoretical knowledge, the students could not draw a clear picture about the development of the specific research field they were going to study. For example, S1 stated:

I have limited knowledge about my topic. Sometimes I found some terms hard to understand. So I have to read a lot. I don’t know how to analyze the compositions in what aspects and how to analyze them in a logical way, just because I read so little about it… The most important thing is to read as much as possible. (Interview with S1)

S2 mentioned her two concerns. One was design a language test and finding participants and the other was to shape her theoretical framework. She conveyed that:

Most of my work focused on the theoretical framework and review of pragmatic theories. Although I know what I am going to investigate, I still don’t know what pragmatic inferences are in the theory. So I have to read the theory and find out the pragmatic inference that I want to examine. (Interview with S2)

After the second round of presentation on research design, S2 was still not satisfied with her theoretical framework. She said, “I don’t have much breakthrough in the literature review and I still have to work on it.”

S3 changed his research focus from “reading ability” to “reading comprehension”. He was still in doubt about his focus, until he handed in the final proposal. This uncertainty mainly resulted from his poor understanding of “reading ability”. In his words,

My supervisor suggested me redefining reading ability. So the test will change. I have to read more books and then draw a conclusion about the definition of reading ability by myself. It was really a challenge for me. (Interview with S3)

S4 was confident in her study, but she encountered difficulty in situating her study in the related theoretical framework. S5 and S6 admitted their misconception of some concepts in their proposals. All the participants came to realize that deficiency of knowledge in theory and concepts became a great obstacle for them to complete research designs. They realized that they needed to expand their reading and digest the related theory first. Otherwise, they would have more problems in conducting their studies and later in writing their theses.

4.1.2 Problems about students themselves

Different personality traits and attitudes influenced the participants’ action and performance in the process of composing their proposals. S1 and S3 were more obedient and dependent on their supervisors. S1 realized that she relied a lot on her supervisor.
In the second presentation I didn’t know [what]…to do. I just waited for my supervisor’s ideas and waited to do what he told me…I don’t know how to move on and this is really a kind of torture of my mind. (Interview with S1)

Comparatively, S2, S5 and S6 were more independent, though they had anxieties about different writing steps. They always made sufficient preparation before discussion with others. Therefore, they moved on quickly in selecting their research topic and in making their research designs. Their different personalities and attitudes toward writing appeared to have a great impact on the progress of their proposal writing. A proactive attitude toward writing made the students more engaged in writing practices and more assertive in seeking help from different sources (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999).

4.2 Students’ coping strategies and growth in the process of proposal writing
Despite numerous problems that the six student participants encountered in learning to write a thesis proposal, the data analysis revealed that they tried different coping strategies to solve their problems. For example, they tended to select research topics of personal interest and of similar life background as illustrated in Section 4.1.1. They also consulted their supervisors, participated in class presentations, and observed their peers’ presentations, and these will be discussed in detail below. They also tried to search and collect relevant literature papers through the library or with the help of friends. The participants gradually developed these coping strategies in the process which helped them adjust themselves to the conventions of doing research and writing a thesis proposal.

(1) Negotiations with supervisors
Negotiating with their supervisors was crucial for the students to be able to complete thesis proposal writing. Over the process of writing their proposals, the participants needed to report to their supervisors about their progress. As novice writers, they could not solve every problem encountered in writing. Especially when they were uncertain about possible theoretical support or feasibility of the proposed study, they turned to their supervisors for guidance.

Some were active in seeking support from their supervisors, while others were reluctant. They all seemed to be afraid of meeting with their supervisors and sensitive to their supervisors’ comments on their performances. For example, S1 said that her negotiation with her supervisor was not productive because of her insufficient preparation.

The most frustrating thing is caused by unproductive negotiation. When I go to see him, I am not feeling good, because I don’t prepare well for my study. Sometimes he asks me some questions about my topic and I cannot answer them. I cannot find my own identity. I also have a strong desire that he won’t be so critical to me. (Interview with S1)

However, S1 indeed followed her supervisor’s guidance and could perform data analysis well. T1 considered S1 a diligent student who spent a lot of time on her study. S1’s presentation and written product were better than he had anticipated. However, he
thought S1 was weak in synthesizing previous literature and critical thinking. In T1’s words,

She's really done a lot of work. But she is not quite capable of summarizing the literature...She needs to improve her abilities in abstraction and summarization...Her critical ability is a little weak. She is a good performer and she can do well what I tell her. But when it comes to selection and combination, it is hard for her to handle. Her realization of the purpose of the study is not enough. If I didn't give her some suggestions in this aspect, she could not think it deeply and holistically. (Interview with T1)

S1 had difficulty in writing a literature review, which she attributed to insufficient knowledge of her research field. Therefore, she tried to enlarge her reading. In addition, she asked her friends who studied in other universities to find relevant books and papers for her.

In comparison, S2 was quite an intelligent and capable student, who often received praise from her supervisor and other professors. Whenever meeting with her supervisor, she was well prepared and the negotiation always went smoothly. However, at the beginning she was also worried about her meeting with T2.

I felt a little nervous and anxious because I don’t know whether she will appreciate my word or approve my ideas. I am also afraid that my questions are silly. When I meet her my minds often go blank. I don’t know what to ask because of nervousness...If my supervisor didn’t pick up too many problems in my proposal, it would give me much courage. (Interview with S2)

T2 was quite satisfied with S2’s performance in the process. She considered S2 an active and independent student. They cooperated very well in their discussions. She said,

I think we cooperated well. She selected the topic I am interested in. Every time she came to me, she was well prepared about her questions and we soon got into negotiation. Sometimes she held her ideas. If she was reasonable I would make a concession. She had no problem in language expression. (Interview with T2)

In contrast, S3 was always afraid of meeting with his supervisor, because of his insufficient preparation for his study. However, he admitted that his supervisor gave him great support. In his words,

While negotiating with my supervisor, there was misunderstanding of the topic. Actually the communication part is very difficult to handle, because he asked me so many follow-up questions...and these questions drove me to the corner. (Laugh) Actually I like to talk to my supervisor...During the interaction with him, I learnt a lot. It contributes to the present proposal. I also dislike the interaction with my supervisor. Maybe, I am not that wise to understand his real purpose. (Interview with S3)
His supervisor T3 said that S3 was not active in negotiating with him about the proposal and did not finish the readings he had suggested. T3 was not satisfied with S3’s writing, as he commented in the interview, “He seems to understand what he is going to investigate, but his writing shows that he doesn’t.” During the process of writing his thesis proposal, S3 was in great anxiety. Commenting on his anxiety, T3 said, “If he didn’t come to discuss about his study with me, it meant that he didn’t do the reading, or he wouldn’t be worried.” Through discussions with T3, S3 gradually realized his problems and tried to follow his supervisor’s guidance, be patient and work more efficiently.

S4 was the most confident student of the six. She was able to convince her supervisor of the feasibility of her study and that she was active in searching for help from different sources when she had problems. She was able to understand most of the theories about her topic and did a pilot study abroad, but she was not clear about data analysis. To help her analyze the data logically and reasonably, T4 illustrated it by analyzing part of S4’s data for her at her office. S4 admitted that her supervisor helped her a lot and considered the negotiation with her supervisor was fruitful every time.

S5 showed her reluctance to meet with her supervisor at the beginning, because she was afraid of disturbing her supervisor. She simply struggled alone by reading extensively, and finally selected the topic herself. However, she did not realize her misconception of the theory in her study until she discussed it with her supervisor.

I am not active enough to discuss my study with my supervisor. I am afraid of wasting her time. But I think discussion with my supervisor is very important. (Interview with S5)

She made corrections and improvement of her proposal during the interaction with her supervisor and peers. Once she started to talk to her supervisor, S5 found their negotiation quite productive and pleasant.

Unlike the other students, S6 was not afraid of meeting with her supervisor, but she found their discussions not productive sometimes because of her insufficient preparation. She said,

I don’t have anxieties in negotiation with my supervisor, because he is nearly at my parents’ age and I respect him very much. I hope I can do the best. The negotiation is not always fruitful...It is because of me that I didn’t prepare well what I wanted to negotiate with him. (Interview with S6)

In general, S6 had pleasant negotiation with her supervisor. Her supervisor was satisfied with her writing at different stages. T6 also tried to provide S6 with different reading materials. As for the organizational problems, her supervisor considered it common for a novice writer and believed that students would develop the ability gradually with the increase of reading and writing practice. The assistance from their supervisors helped the six students socialize in the research community. This supported Dong’s (1996) finding that the academic advisors played an important role in helping graduate students learn how to construct new knowledge claims.
(2) Interaction with peers

In addition to seeking support from their supervisors, the student participants were able to solve some of their difficulties in thesis proposal writing through their interaction with their peers in the writing course. Except for S4, the other participants all expressed their anxiety before or during the presentation. For example, S1 explained:

Before the presentation I worried that my proposal will be rejected…During the presentation I always felt nervous, because I lack[ed] confidence in my proposal and speaking. No matter how well I prepared, I felt nervous…But I think it is a very good form to improve my thesis. (Interview with S1)

However, the participants all appreciated the comments on their presentations from their instructor and peers. They also admitted that they benefited a lot from observing and commenting on their peers’ presentations. S2 said she appreciated the suggestions from her peers on her proposal. But she also admitted: “To some extent, I am afraid that they may find the big pitfall in my proposal and I have to throw away the whole proposal.” Although S3 did not like to do presentations, he liked to observe his peers’ presentations.

I don’t like to do presentation in front of my classmates. Sometimes I feel shy or awkward… I am afraid to be challenged by our classmates…I like to observe the presentation of my classmates, because I can learn a lot from them and their handouts. For instance, the format and the questions they had [raised]. (Interview with S3)

S4 was good at spoken English, so she liked to do presentations and was always ready for challenges. In contrast, S5 admitted that she was a little nervous in the presentation, but she liked the discussion in class, and in the process, she gradually became open and extroverted. She explained:

At the beginning I was a little nervous, because I was afraid of arguing with other classmates. But actually I didn’t fail to answer their questions. Some of their suggestions were helpful. In the process, I became open and outgoing. (Interview with S5)

S6 often struggled about her study alone. She showed great anxiety about the presentation and interaction with her peers, but she tried to adjust herself to class discussion. In her words,

Before the peer discussion I go over the topic and think about what questions they will ask. Then I will work out my answers. But it is a pity I didn’t meet the questions that I had prepared…Although I am anxious I still welcome the discussion and I think it is challenging and useful. (Interview with S6)

Above all, the six students regarded it as useful to discuss their studies with their peers. Their anxieties mainly resulted from their uncertainty about their studies or their timidity.
of losing face when they failed to explain their studies in front of peers. Over the process, they not only learned about how to conduct their studies, but also learned how to communicate with peers in the academic community.

5. Conclusions and Implications

This study investigated the experience of six graduate English-majors learning to write a thesis proposal in English. It was found that the students encountered such problems as lack of theoretical knowledge and logical organization, lack of ability to synthesize literature, and lack of critical thinking in the process of writing. With the process of doing assignments for the academic writing course, the participants gradually learned to negotiate with their supervisors and interact with their peers. The critical comments and suggestions they obtained from their supervisors and peers helped them narrow down their research topics, design feasible research plans, and eventually complete the proposals.

Compared to ESL learners in English-medium universities, EFL students confront even more challenges and problems in writing in English. The students in the present study perceived proposal and thesis writing quite challenging, as they had little practice in English academic writing prior to their graduate studies. Facing compulsory proposal writing, they had to struggle hard. Obviously, they needed a transitional period to acquire certain academic writing skills before they started to do research-related writing tasks.

The findings of this study have several implications for English education in EFL contexts such as China. First, explicit instruction may be an effective way for graduate students including English majors to learn to write in academic English. It is also necessary for undergraduate students to be exposed explicitly to different genres of academic writing. Thus, when they come to graduate schools, they will experience fewer struggles and frustrations in meeting the demands of academic English writing. Second, an academic writing course at the senior level of the undergraduate program or at the beginning of the graduate program is crucial in preparing graduate students for academic English writing. This, in turn, demands qualified academic writing instructors who know how to help EFL students to grasp academic English writing conventions and write from sources. Third, it is also important to encourage students to share ideas and comments on each other’s writing. Through peer evaluation and discussion, they learn how to cooperate with others as well as refine their thinking through peer discussion. Moreover, support and encouragement from the course instructor or thesis supervisors are necessary for EFL students to gain confidence in their continual pursuit of their academic goals.

This study examined how six English major graduate students learned to write thesis proposals. Future research could involve more participants from different research fields of English majors such as translation, literature, culture studies and linguistics to see if they have similar difficulties or challenges as the participants in the present study. Furthermore, an increasing number of writers of other disciplines also need to publish academic papers in English in the EFL context. It is important to examine how this group of writers learns to write in academic English. All these studies will help us achieve a better understanding
of the learning process of EFL writers and then accordingly provide necessary supporting program.

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