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Stigma, tensions, and apprehension

The academic writing experience of international students

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines the experiences of engaging with academic writing of international doctoral students in the schools of humanities and education at a UK university. The purpose of this paper is to uncover the real accounts of international students whose cultural and language backgrounds are often marginalised and considered, not as facilitators, but as barriers to academic writing in the western context of universities.

Design/methodology/approach – Developed broadly within an interpretive post-positivistic paradigm, the study utilised Harré and van Lagenhove, 1999 Positioning theory and Goffman's theory of Stigma to interrogate accounts of 12 students from the two schools in a year-long project involving three focus group discussions, questionnaire responses and personal reflective summaries by the students.

Findings – The paper highlights the notions of stigma associated with their foreign writing conventions and how students experience tensions and apprehensions about their ability as they painfully negotiate the new academic writing conventions of the institution. International students position themselves as vulnerable outsiders working within an ill-defined but highly valued language environment.

Research limitations/implications – The research is limited to the extent that it utilises a very small number of students as its key source of evidence. However, the study was not aimed at providing generalisation as much as it sought to explore issues associated with the use of language by international studying in UK universities.

Practical implications – The study has practical implications for the professionals in HE to develop clear guidelines about what constitutes good English and to provide greater support to international students who see themselves as vulnerable outsiders in an environment which marginalises their linguistic and cultural identities.

Social implications – The study has implications for the social, cultural, and academic integration of international students in HE institutions.

Originality/value – The paper signals a need for diverse writing frameworks which seek to promote rather than silence and marginalise potentially rich sources of knowledge and understanding in an increasingly globalising world.

Keywords Academic writing, Language, Stigma, Tensions, Apprehension, International students

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Arguably, the most prevalent challenge international students in higher education face is the question of having to navigate their academic learning and writing in a non-native language (Holmes, 2006). This is so because both explicit and implicit institutional requirements and expectations in the use of western writing conventions and models place a heavy burden on international students whose cultural and language competences are often considered in deficit terms as not only inadequate for

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doctoral-level writing, but as impeding effective western writing traditions and communicative competence. A significant body of research exists which explores the notion of the experience of international students in foreign learning environments in the UK (see, e.g.: Allen and Higgins, 1994; Gaskin, 2002; Leonard *et al.*, 2003; Unterhalter and Green, 1997; Williams *et al.*, 1986). Most of these, however, tend to be surveys based on the measurement of student satisfaction with different aspects of their higher education experience. Very little exists which provides detailed insights about how international students understand and negotiate the challenges of learning and writing in a foreign language context.

This paper examines the academic writing experiences of 12 international doctoral students in the schools of humanities and education at a UK university during the 2010-2011 academic year. The research involved three focus group discussions with the same students, self-completion biographical questionnaires, and brief individual reflective summaries from the students.

The UK is the second most favoured study destination (after the USA) by foreign students for a wide variety of reasons including, rather curiously, the opportunity to learn about and in English (Findlay *et al.*, 2010; Open Doors Data International Students, 2012/2013). It is for the same reason that many international students experience the hardest academic challenge during their tenure in English universities. Yet the proportion of international students in English universities has been increasing year on year for the last ten years. For example, it rose by 6 per cent in 2011, in comparison to the 2010 numbers (UKCISA, 2012). The majority of these students come from the EU, with the Republic of Ireland, Germany, and France being the largest exporters. Outside the EU, China, India, and Nigeria send the largest numbers of international students to England, although numbers from Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand have been steadily increasing over the years. Almost 40 per cent of all international students in English universities are undertaking post-graduate research degree studies. The ratio of home students vs international students in English universities varies widely from about 5 to 40 per cent and the majority of them go to these universities to study business and administrative studies, engineering and technology subjects, social studies and humanities. Among these students, approximately 80 per cent use English as a second language and about 60 per cent would be experiencing instruction in English for the first time in their lives (Singh, 2011).

The university in which the study was undertaken had approximately 12 per cent (of its 27,000) international students at the time of the research. However, it aspires to recruit up to about 30 per cent in the next five years. Students were selected from humanities and education as these subjects had among the most diverse range of sending countries and high percentages of international students who had little or no previous experience of instruction in English in a university.

Language and the experience of learning and writing

Most post-graduate research assessment is based on extended pieces of academic writing. For example, doctoral students are expected to write a 75,000 word thesis in good English. The term "good English" is taken for granted and is not defined in the official documents of universities, including the university in which this study was undertaken. This is rather curious, as different versions of English exist in the world. In fact, of the two billion English speakers in the world, only around 350 million are native English speakers (Crystal, 2010). Yet it is the language of this minority which is privileged and considered the "authentic" language of learning and writing in English universities. The political,

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ideological cultural and neo-colonial debates around this phenomenon, despite their importance, are not the core of this paper. (see, e.g. Phillipson, 1992, 2009).

Language is indispensable to learning and accounts for most of the learning achieved by students everywhere (Turner and George, 2011). In addition, thinking happens through the medium of language and there is a wide body of research, which shows that people think most effectively and efficiently in their mother languages (Doğan Can Akçin, 2011; Kavaliauskienė, 2009; Littlewood, 1984). For second language users of English, a great deal of conceptual understanding can be lost in translation. That often inevitably leads to conceptual differences in understanding of similar ideas by students from different parts of the world. Second language users are sometimes also judged as imprecise, long winded, and context focused while first language users are seen as accurate, to the point, and conceptually effective (Phillipson, 1992). However, as Phillipson (1992) argues, such value judgements tend to give prominence and authenticity to one form of English while labelling other forms as less elegant and ineffective for communicating, disseminating and expressing ideas. He argues that English should not be the Lingua Franca of HE at all and that universities need to move towards a multi-lingual framework through which other linguistic models of the language gain acceptance and provide a platform for a more diversified and multi-lingual English in order to avoid what HE terms linguistic imperialism characterised by dominance of a mono-lingual model of English in universities.

While the relationship between language and learning is complex, the weight of evidence seems to suggest the following associations:

- that people learn more effectively through the medium of their mother languages (Gudhlanga, 2005);
- that students attain deeper levels of conceptual understanding when they process ideas in their mother languages (Chaudron, 1998);
- that students who learn in a second language requires more time to gain similar levels of understanding compared to that required by first language users (Chaudron, 1998);
- that people from different parts of the world adopt different rhetorical writing styles, with some showing preference for inductive forms while others prefer deductive styles (Otto, 1997); and
- writing styles reflect specific cultural nuances which are not universally applicable or employed in different parts of the world (Siepmann, 2001).

There is need therefore to explore, albeit briefly, the relationship that exists between culture and academic writing.

Cultures and academic writing

Fox (1995) produced a seminal text entitled "Listening to the world: cultural issues in academic writing" in which she chronicles the narratives of several international students and captures the views of staff at the University of Michigan about expectations and realities of academic writing. Overall, she concludes that international students experience a range of emotions, which broadly translates as frustration with academic writing in a foreign context. The frustration is driven largely by two issues. The first is a lack of clarity both in official documents and amongst the staff of the university about the meaning of analytic and critical writing. Many of the international

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students she talked to confessed to not having a clear idea what their institutions meant by critical writing. The students also noted that their essays were scored lowly because of not engaging critically with the literary discourses of their subjects. Fox notes that in some countries, especially in the east, being critical of ideas of scholarly authorities is a punishable offence and recounting those ideas from other sources is regarded as immensely disrespectful and undermining of the authority. In other words, what in the west may be called simple descriptive analysis is the pinnacle of critique in some eastern countries. The second is a lack of clarity amongst university staff about the meaning of analytic and critical writing. She noted that writing critically had become a part of the interior landscape of the culture of academic writing and was assumed to have a universal meaning to the extent that no one found it necessary to define the concept. Students thus became frustrated at being asked to do what no one seems to understand clearly. Our personal experience of teaching students from the east suggests that they become comfortable with writing critically once they understand that being critical does not just mean saying negative things about other people's work.

Students also expressed concern with having to be forced to adopt what they saw as an American writing style, which had no room for any other style from elsewhere. It was as if the students were expected to shed off their identities and begin developing a new one. Many of them considered this as a serious invasion and disregard of their academic personalities which had served them so well in their home countries and which the university had previously accepted when they enroled into the institution, but which they now have to cast away in order to accommodate and adopt a new academic identity. For some, this felt like institutionalised deception and selfish organisational interest in furthering academic imperialism.

There is also the question of learning styles which are culture bound (Fox, 1995). Fox discusses a wide range of culture-specific learning styles. For example, she notes that what in the west may be described as rote learning is considered in some eastern countries to be the highest form of deep learning. Therefore, some students especially from Japan and China show preference for learning from a specific and limited set of books rather than the preferred learning from a wide variety of sources which western institutions privilege. Equally, there is greater emphasis on group instructional methods and assessment in many eastern countries while learning and assessment are largely individually organised and determined in many western nations. This may be related broadly to collectivist and individualistic societies in the east and west, respectively (Hofstede, 1999).

By far the worst phenomenon to emerge from the literature on cultures and academic learning and writing is the notion of stigmatisation. This refers to situations where people feel that they are prejudged (often in a negative way) about their identities and cultural backgrounds in relation to indigenous cultural groups. Such generalisations about people based on their demographic characteristics could create forms of "academic tribes" (Betcher and Trowler, 2001) in universities. For example, it is not unusual in universities to hear both staff and students saying that:

- students from China and other eastern countries depend on rote learning which leads to surface conceptual understanding;
- students from eastern countries are less proficient with critical engagement with the literature;
- students from eastern countries are less able to work with ideas that require deep analysis and application; and

- students from eastern countries are more prone to plagiarising in extended writing assignments.

Such comments constitute the basis for the stigmatisation that many international students feel as learners in English universities. On account of the above, two theoretical frameworks were selected to provide a basis for the empirical aspects of the project.

Theoretical framework: Positioning theory

Our study was framed within the Positioning theory, (Harré and van Lagenhove, 1999) and the Social Stigma theory (Goffman, 1963). Both are micro-sociological theories, which attempt to explain human interaction, and not social structures and systems, as the key to understanding how societies come about.

In Positioning theory, Harré and van Lagenhove (1999) argue that the way people position themselves in human interaction, such as in conversations, in teaching and learning, in discussions and in non-verbal encounters frames the outcomes and products of those interactions. For example, a teacher who positions him/herself as authoritarian in relation to students and is seen as such by them, engenders submissive reactions from students which tend to include: student's attention, copious note taking, discipline and excessive orderliness which a less authoritarian teacher cannot obtain from the same students. If on the other hand, students position themselves as deviant and hard to control, they create a different type of classroom dynamic in which the work of teachers can become difficult to manage. Harre' and Langenhove suggest that positioning is a more dynamic term to use than role as it defines a dyadic relationship between two people or groups of people. Students can position themselves in their relationship with their teachers. Equally, teachers can also position their students. Therefore, it is perfectly possible for teachers to see their students as competent or incompetent and for students also to view themselves in the same terms. Such positioning can have significant impact on students' attitudes to their subjects of study, to the teacher and to the way they are taught, which in turn could have a bearing on study outcomes. Therefore, in this study, we were interested to understand how international students position themselves in conversations and debates surrounding their academic writing and how they position their teachers in the same context too. Harre' and Langenhove argue that the positions can be tried out, abandoned, or adopted depending on the outcomes they generate. It was therefore important in this project to examine the extent to which the positions students took about the issue of academic writing were temporary, permanent, or shifting. This is why we decided to have three focus groups with them over a period of eight months.

Goffman (1963) dealt with the notion of social stigma, which he defined as the "extreme disapproval of or discontent with a person on the grounds of characteristics that distinguish them from other members of a society". While agreeing in principle with Goffman, we disagree that the disapproval or discontent has to be "extreme". First, it is difficult to put a measure on the notion "extreme" and second, even what may be called mild disapproval or discontent can have a debilitating effect on others. In other words, it may be seen as extreme by the receiver even if not by the producer. Our contention is that stigma does not derive only from other people's disapproval; in our view, it also emanates from how the disapproved feel about their state of being disapproved. We consider stigma to imply a violation, whether perceived or real of other people's identity and acknowledge a variety of sources of stigmatisation in society including disability, race, health status, geographical location, language, colour, gender, age, sexual orientation, legitimacy, nationality, ethnicity, religion among many others.

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Goffman has provided a useful framework for analysing sources of social stigma. He identified three categories including visible external sources such as skin colour, obesity, gender; personal traits sources, such as mental health status, drug addiction, criminal background; and finally, tribal stigmas, which relate to real or imagined traits such as ethnicity, religion, nationality. Our theoretical analysis suggests that these sources could be classed into continuous and discontinuous sources of social stigma. By continuous sources, we mean those sources that are not categorical and which could include many shades of the same phenomenon. For example, everyone in this world is disabled in one way or the other. However, some have severe forms of disability and it may be that those are the ones we may choose to include in a sample of analysis. The other category includes discontinuous sources. For example, you are either male or female, Chinese or English, obese or not obese. However, we recognise that some non-obese people may feel as if they are obese or some males may feel as if they are female. Therefore there is need to find out from those taking part in the study what their position is with respect to a perceived or real source of identity.

Stigmatisation can have a range of effects on people, including feelings of identity erosion or loss; feelings of being socially excluded, prejudiced, discriminated against and has been identified as a major cause of depression in mental health circles (Sartorius, 2006, 2007). However, we know little about how widespread stigmatisation is in the context of an increasingly internationalised higher education environment and even less about how stigma is recognised and what its effects are on students who come to learn from overseas. In order to explore these issues, we developed the following methodological approach described in the next section.

Methodological approach

Working broadly within an interpretive paradigm (Robson, 2002), we were acutely aware of the place of subjectivity (Robson, 2002) as both a useful source of "hard to get" evidence in social research and as somewhat problematic in the sense of not being considered by some to constitute a sound basis for evidence-informed practice. However, we are resolutely of the belief that views, perceptions, ideas, and opinions, which constitute a significant dimension of important phenomenological knowledge despite being of a largely subjective nature, do not occupy a lesser status in the hierarchies of knowledge. Social science and educational research in particular addresses questions, which interrogate why things happen the way they do and how people personally relate with issues around an educational phenomenon. The so-called subjective bases of knowledge are, for us, the most relevant and appropriate sources of valid evidence for such questions.

The purpose of our study was not to achieve generalisation about international students, but to explore how a group of volunteer doctoral students in two schools in a single university perceived and related with the question of academic writing given their position as additional English language speakers in an English speaking university. Because the study was exploratory, aimed at the identification of issues rather than at generalising the findings, we invited international students to participate in the focus discussions on a voluntary basis. The only qualification they needed to possess to be admitted into the focus discussions was that they had to be international students and having English as a second or additional language at university. In the appeal, we also pointed that they would be requested to come for these discussions at least three times over an eight months period and that the

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discussion would take place at mutually agreed times. Initially we got about 19 volunteers, but decided to use data only from those who attended all the three sessions. In total therefore the study derived data from 12 international students. Those with a quantitative orientation would conceivably frown at the size of this evidence base. However, the study aimed at gaining some level of in-depth analysis and understanding of the types of issues that relate to the experience of second language learning and how this related to the academic writing experience of international students. Second, the intention was not to generalise and make substantial conclusions about these experiences, but only to get a sense of the nature of issues associated with this relationship.

The selected theoretical frameworks (Positioning and Social Stigma) and the exploratory purposes of the research resulted in asking the following questions.

Key research question

RQ1. What issues do international students identify relating to second language use and academic writing in the context of their learning in an English university?

Sub research questions

RQ2. In what ways do international students position themselves in the discourses of academic writing in a foreign language-learning context?

RQ3. How do international students experience the issues of academic writing and in what ways do they consider the experience as facilitating or inhibiting of their scholarly identity?

RQ4. What can we learn from this exploratory study which requires further analysis through research and which may have a bearing on both policy and practice to enhance the identities and academic writing outcomes of international students?

Study population, sample, and data collection

The university chosen for this study has approximately 5,000 international students whose demographic composition closely resembles the national UK picture (UKCISA, 2011). For example, the majority of the international students come from the EU (ordinarily not referred to as international students in UK universities) followed by those from China, the USA, from a number of Asian countries, Saudi Arabia and Nigeria. As the project was not meant to lay a base for making generalisation, the notion of demographic representativeness was not a primary consideration. We were more interested in people who would volunteer to give of their time in discussions that would take place across the academic teaching year. In total, 12 students attended across the three sessions. (Robson, 2002) describes the affordances and constraints that come with a level of loyalty to the cause from research informants, namely a large emotional and intellectual investment in the issue which allows for unique insight but also bias and possible social agenda. In addition, there is also though the danger of socially acceptable responses when informants belong to same circles of social and academic intimacy.

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Focus groups were used because they provide a platform for the social construction and cross-checking of individual and multiple realities associated with ideas that tend to engender controversy (Robson, 2002). However, we were resigned to the fact that focus group discussions cannot be used as a substitute for conventional in-depth interviews with a group rather than with only one participant at a time. We were also alert to the fact that focus group discussions carry several disadvantages not least of which are the tensions associated with assuring complete confidentiality of research participants. We weighed this against the need for social construction and reconstruction of discourses and understandings about issues on hand. In addition, we discussed this with participants and agreed to use a definition of confidentiality of the group-level data and the need to maintain individual confidentiality outside of the group as opposed to within the group. At the group sessions, we gave a broad statement of purpose of the session namely to provide participants with an opportunity to express their views regarding their experience of using English as a language of scholarship and the trials and tribulations associated with that experience. Apart from setting the rules of engagement, such as avoiding interjections, respecting other peoples' views, and affording others full opportunity to complete their thoughts in discussion, we allowed discussion to flow freely while we listened intently noting down any issues we considered would need some elaboration at some point.

After the last focus group session, participants were asked to provide an account of their personal reflective views on the subject of language and academic scholarship in the university. With full permission of the participants, the three discussions were captured on digital recorders yielding a total of about eight hours of recorded material. One of the researchers undertook the responsibility of transcribing all the recordings both as a strategy for strengthening confidentiality and also as a process of beginning to engage with the text. The project thus had two main data sets from the focus group discussions and personal reflective accounts.

Table I provides a summary of the demographic features of the sample of students who participated in the study. We used pseudonyms based on English names to camouflage the identity of the research participants.

Represented in this small sample were students from China, Hong Kong, the EU, Japan, Africa, and the Middle East who generally constitute the largest sending nations to western universities.

Table I. Demographic features of the research participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Country of origin	Study area
Atkin	M	Nigeria	Education
Betty	F	Poland	Education
Darcy	F	Japan	Humanities
Eric	M	Qatar	Education
Felix	M	Malaysia	Education
Grace	F	China	Humanities
Harriet	F	Japan	Humanities
Issie	F	China	Humanities
Jennifer	F	Saudi Arabia	Education
Kerrie	F	Qatar	Education
Loveness	F	Japan	Humanities
Mirriam	F	Pakistan	Education

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We used content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Neuendorf, 2001) as a tool for making sense of the data. Three content analysis strategies are recognised in the literature. First, conventional content analysis is based on the use of emerging rather than predetermined codes from the texts. This conforms to the naturalistic assumptions behind interpretive research. The problem with this approach is that in focus groups, participants may echo each other's views and repeat rather than offer new insights resulting in a false coding system. Second, a directed coding strategy offers a different approach to content analysis. Here the codes are predetermined and based on existing theory in the area and the data is explored to discover the extent to which it conforms to existing theory. The problem with this approach is that this often leads to confirmation or disconfirmation of theory and offers less opportunity for probing beyond what is already known. The final approach is what is called a summative content analysis approach (Silverman, 2006). In this approach, data are carefully scrutinised to discover the frequency of recurring themes and views and contextual reflection of these views to observe any emerging patterns. Although numbers are limiting, we were keen to discover the strength of opinions and views of participants and decided that in some cases, it would be useful to deploy the summative approach.

We decided to adopt all three approaches as each was considered to bring benefits to the analysis and have provisionally referred to our approach as an eclectic content analysis approach. We had the benefit of Positioning theory (Harré and van Lagenhove, 1999) and the Social Stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) from the start and were keen to discover the extent to which our data related to these frameworks. However, we remained alert to the fact that the data could throw up new insights outside of these frameworks, which we also hoped to capture. What follows is a presentation and discussion of the findings from this research. The longitudinal data obtained in the three focus groups was not used for this paper and will be the subject of a subsequent analysis.

Students' positioning in language and academic discourses

Harré and van Lagenhove (1999) argue that the way people position themselves in any discourse influences quite significantly the views they hold about different aspects or issues within that discourse. We trawled through the data to find different ways that demonstrated the students' positions within the debates around language and academic writing and competence. Students appeared to position themselves in three main ways as discussed below.

Contextualised/selective users of English

Students generally positioned themselves as contextualised users of western English which they find difficult to attain and which they use out of necessity rather than because they saw it as a superior or even standard model of communication and academic writing. Atkin illustrated this quite powerfully when he said:

> When we come here, this place expects us to produce good English […], which can be understood by first language speakers. We have challenges in getting to this level of mastery […] but when some of us get back home, we drop that English language right from the airport. We never use it again. So mastery is good internationally, but when we go back to our local communities, it is something different […].

Betty added to this discussion highlighting the context-specific use of western English:

> […] it is very important to distinguish between this. If someone wants to stay in England […] or wants example to publish in English journals, then it's important to have this mastery […].

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Finally, Darcy had this to say:

> Even if you graduate from PhD studies and you have the certificate (the recognition, when you return to your home country, you don't use the English. Even here, we you only want this high level to be critical and pass the viva, get the PhD.

As selective or contextualised users, there does not seem to be a full commitment to learning western English other than for its utilitarian and immediate value associated with getting the PhD. This brings to question the extent to which the language expectations placed by universities and the demands for exacting standards of writing have long-term benefits on the end-users.

Constrained learners

Many of our focus group participants saw themselves as constrained learners in a new and sometimes hostile learning environment. Some spoke about not having any choice in the language issues. For example, the constraints of publication and publishing in local journals and other outlets constituted the greatest incentive for learning and using western forms of language in universities. Darcy said:

> So I mean, even if we have different purposes so […] if we really want to get our thesis published, we really have to look to native English we actually don't have a choice do we?

It is also about universities and scholarly journals as gate keepers and how being successful is determined solely by the requirements of such gate keepers. Again, Darcy added:

> If you talk about publishing, the problem is now the gatekeeper normally British English or American English oriented. Therefore, beyond the academic requirements, you have to learn the tricks of the trade and acceptance is only when you show this mastery.

Despite acknowledging supervisors as being flexible, another level of constraint was identified at the examiner level. Students were somewhat apprehensive about whether the flexibility of their supervisors would be demonstrated by examiners in assessment of their theses or any other doctoral learning written material. They tended to adopt a default position of caution expecting examiners to be less tolerant of non-western forms of writing. The idea that students felt constrained by an environment, which offered little or no option to determine their preferred writing style, was captured in the following quote:

> […] the examiners may not agree with my language, about them if I insist I'm gonna (going to) have my international student's right to write in this way, but in the (end) maybe the examiners they don't really agree and then the result will be, you know, not what I expect. My point is what is the international student's right as a writer, where-what is our right? So can we articulate our voice as a non-native writer, academic writer? (Harriet).

The question of the dominance of content or language was asked and debated at length, with the overall weight of opinion leaning towards the need to prioritise ideas above language use:

> I think the idea (content) is very important, and the supervisors and teachers can help us […] they must knowledge first and language second. They can help us with the language […] and we are doing it in another language, which is English, and so this an extra challenge. There is a three stage challenge here, first there is the language, then the culture, and most important the knowledge (Felix).

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Students also clearly positioned themselves as foreigners who despite bringing with them much cultural and social value, become undervalued, labelled and stereotyped, as demonstrated in the next subsection.

The foreigner student position

The notion of being foreigners was captured several times by the students in the focus discussions. In some cases, it was referred to in relative terms, comparing themselves in terms of intellectual ability of local students. This was captured rather interestingly by Eric who said:

> Yes, I think we are genius, yes genius […] because if you are doing PhD research, it is difficult in terms of the knowledge needed. However, we have to do it in another language […] so people who got their PhDs from another language […] are genius; they pass all the three challenges (the culture, the language and the knowledge tests).

Others noted the contradictory styles of language use for academic purposes within the host institution, which compounded the problems for foreign students:

> […] But if you go to the writing centre here, when they teach you writing, they teach you about use of the passive voice whereas when you write your thesis, you write in the first person (Darcy).

Such dilemmas are bound to compound anxiety that "foreign" students have regarding the academic and professional expectations.

However, it is also the negative labelling and stereotypes linked to being a foreign student. Some students felt that there is an overriding view on campus about the lower writing abilities of foreign students in general and that this view is held by both local students and by staff in general:

> […] People have their differences, but […] one often hears that non-native speakers always write like this […] while home students write in different ways. You become labelled from the very start and have to work hard to disprove the stereotyping that comes with the label of being a lower ability foreign writer (Eric).

It appears that positioning themselves as foreigners is closely linked to perceptions of being seen by others as less able or as people whose writing skills are in deficit. The students themselves however do not see themselves in the same way. Therefore, they seem to harbour positive images about being foreigners, but these positive images are sometimes overshadowed by the external views held by the significant others, and especially by staff within the institution.

Student's experience of language and academic writing

The second research sub-question focused on the students' experience of academic writing in the university and how that experience facilitated or constrained their writing or academic competence. Here we used Goffman's theory of Social Stigma as a framework for deductive analysis. The theory argues that society establishes means of categorising people as normal and otherwise. Those labelled as normal fit a set of characteristics, which define their identity as "normals". We therefore set out to find the extent to which students used terms in their description of their language experience in ways which inferred disapproval, disaffection, marginalisation, apprehensiveness, stereotype, inability, and their lack of skills by others. Use of such terms in descriptions of experience directly or indirectly implies feelings of being

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considered outside the identity of the normals, i.e. feelings of being stigmatised. Four key areas were eloquently captured in the students' discourses, which helped unravel the ways they experienced academic writing in the university.

Academic writing as based on an elusive standard

Students expressed frustration and apprehension at not being able to discern whether or not a standard that would guide their writing experience existed. Although some felt that a standard existed, most felt that there does not seem to be agreement across the institution and even among staff in the same teaching area about what this standard was. Still other felt that a standard would not serve the creative instincts that define academic writing in any meaningful way. It felt to most students as if the experience of writing in this environment was like driving down a slippery and poorly signposted road. Confused by what may be termed a mirage of choice of academic writing models, Jennifer said:

> […] we are happy with more choices […] but I mean there are no specified norms […] only hidden norms, so some people […] I feel more confused.

In addition, Felix had a hilarious analogy to share with the other participants. He noted that a dog might be what a cow is in different cultures and that to survive in a different culture:

> […] you just camouflage yourself like a cow or just behave like a cow, but physically you cannot be a cow.

Thus, there seemed to be an acceptance that as foreign students, one has to learn the art of acquiescence and go with the flow. However deep down, the students do not feel that academic writing conventions being imposed on them have a fundamental influence nor do they really change who they are. Imposed writing cultures therefore are used by students to suit the demands of the institution rather than for purposes of real academic transformation.

Others spoke of standards as holding back their progress. For example, Atkin, who was unable to discern when to use "could or should" eventually gave up trying:

> I stopped following the conventions and all this, and decided it was holding me back. I found out I could not speak proper English in class, and so I hold back, sometimes will not speak in class […] the standard holds back our communication.

The issue of elusive standards and the experience of confusion were captured vividly by Betty who said:

> […] I wrote a few styles already here at the university and they were different but I did not find anyone recommending the style, how they wanted it, so I still actually do not know how I should really write, if there are some exact rules to follow, so I write how it's coming […] I don't know.

Exasperated by the lack of training to a hidden standard, and referring back to F's cow analogy, Grace noted:

> Of course we have the Chinese way, which emphasises starting from the general to the specific, but here we think they want us to start from the specific to the general, […] they want us to become different cows […] and we have to be trained to be different cows in order to be part of the community […] to be trained to be different kinds of cow Yeah.

It appears that these students' experience of academic writing is confounded by a prevailing and apparent expectation of a standard, which no one can really pin down and

which hovers over them like a mirage. This affects them in many ways including limiting their own creativity and participation; students then become involved in practicing what may be termed academic deception through a quiet process of diplomatic acceptance but without any fundamental transformation-taking place in terms of their academic writing development. It is indeed an uncertain terrain, which students struggle to navigate.

The experience of writing as a struggle

Notwithstanding the elusive nature of a standard to deploy for academic writing purposes, students also expressed their experience of writing as a struggle in a variety of ways.

Struggle with conventions

By far the most referenced struggle was with academic conventions, which were often diametrically opposed to their experience in countries of origin. As noted earlier, in the Chinese context, good writing is developed around the notion of moving from the general to the specific. In Brazil for example, context is of paramount importance to the extent that the message sometimes gets lost in it. In the UK and other western nations, inductive approaches, which privilege starting from the specific to the general, seem to have more currency as writing tradition. Harriet captured this rather succinctly:

> No one tells you directly that this is the expectation, yet if you do not do it, you always get low marks. There seems to be a hidden agenda about this […] part of it I guess is to […] we learn what is needed without expecting to be told explicitly by anyone.

Other language convention issues mentioned in discussion related to, the use of a wide range of literature to develop the essay, which conflicted with the use of specific texts to develop answers as is the practice in Japan, China and other eastern nations; the use of the first person in academic writing was also an issue, which perhaps is not just an issue with international students *per se*, but reflective of the paradigm wars between the objectivists who believe in truth as being independent of the knower and the subjectivists who consider knowledge as inextricably tied with the knower.

Struggle with stigmatisation

Students mentioned in discussion how they felt alienated, excluded, and underrated as academic writers in their new university. Laying emphasis on isolation and the need to adjust to an alien environment, one student said:

> Every foreign student who accepted as an international student in the country not only has to struggle with the new educational system and study environment, but also has to cope with the local culture which is impossible to achieve in a short length of time. In some cases, the loneliness and isolation feelings suffered by international students also may influence their study (Harriet).

A key issue that generated much discussion and debate was that of the International English Language Testing Systems (IELTS) tests, which they write to gain admission to UK universities. Broadly, these tests were seen as biased towards students with a cultural background that comes close to the English one and that they ignored the cultural capital they brought as foreigners, insisting on local understanding of cultural issues. Students discussed at length issues around car boot sales, which one had been asked about in the IELTS. Not being local, the notion of car boot sales made very little sense to foreign students and students reported being marked down, not because they did not know the language, but because they got lost in the cultural context of the questions. Others discussed similar IELTS experiences with other culturally specific topics.

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Struggle with own vulnerabilities

International students often saw themselves as facing double disadvantage in terms of language and in terms of their own research too:

> We think about our limitations of being non-native English speakers in terms of the English forms we produce […]. In addition, we should not forget our knowledge of our research field. This is why we look for native English speakers proofreading in our English writing (Mirriam).

Student vulnerabilities were also expressed in terms of the prejudice associated with their status as foreigners. Sounding rather defiant, this student noted:

> There is a kind of atmosphere that international students or especially Asian students are considered to be special, the weak or the unimportant […] sometimes I feel I need more effort than European students to get the same recognition as some peoples' expectation of Asian students are low […] I really wish the staff get rid of their stereotypes or prejudices, but at the same time I know how difficult this is going to be as the world is still pretty much western centred […] what I can do at a personal level I write a good PhD thesis and journal articles etc with my own English which can shut up those who are obsessed with the myth of standard English (Atkin).

Mention was also made of the fact that as international students, they often felt constrained by not having a formal voice about issues that affect them in the university and especially in the context of the use of English for academic purposes. This chimes quite strongly with both our own experience of working closely with international students and also confirms the experience one of us had as an international student in the same university. One student captured this quite succinctly in the context of this study when they said:

> Perhaps for the first time, as a result of this project, we have a platform to air our views about the use of language. Although we are a minority, staff in the university know nothing about international students […] I think the staffs need some sort of training or something to reconceptualise the idea of their roles […] perhaps this may be a good way to start giving us some voice (Darcy).

Students thus express their own vulnerabilities in the context of English language use for academic purposes in a number of ways, including the persistent fear of being marginalised and labelled as non-native speakers, the prejudice associated with their position as foreigners, and the absence of platforms to have their voices heard about crucial issues that affect them. They seem to be suggesting that they exist as a marginalised tribe who are broadly seen in deficit terms, an excluded and voiceless group of learners in the university academy. This could have the effect of reproducing and exacerbating their vulnerabilities.

Resolving the language issues: students' views

In this section, we use the frequency approach (see methodological section) to identify the most frequently occurring suggestions students mentioned regarding how issues of language could be interrogated in their university. This enabled us to use a simple ranking technique to prioritise the suggested interventions. Table II indicates the frequency with which a range of suggestions featured in the students discourses. The data were obtained from the reflective summaries and also from the focus group interviews and is summarised in Table II.

Summary and discussion

The paper ends with a discussion of emerging themes that have both research and policy and practice implications at universities. The purpose of this paper was

Suggested interventions	Frequency count	Rank	Indicative quotations
Staff orientation and development courses to increase understanding of the contexts and needs of international students	12	1	*The university should try and make sure that academic staff particularly supervisors have a clear idea of the kind of student they are going to transform*
Development of clear guidelines and expectations for language use	6	4	*It is also important for the university to develop its own yardstick for measuring accepted language use […] for now many students are not clear what this standard is*
Changing mindsets, interrogating prejudices and stigma	8	3	*There is a prevailing attitude that there is need to teach international students the better way of thinking and writing and so on […] and what is […] such an attitude is possible because lots of international students are also ready or even happy to accept it*
Building bridges across the cultures	4	6	*In this case the university may have to initiate(a) more cultural activity to expose staff and home students with international culture to increase understanding and relationships*
Transforming the gate keepers: IELTS language tests	10	2	*Fish and chips should not be the only content, but also "tofu". There is too much emphasis on lunch boxes and car boot sales, which mean very little to international students*
Privileging difference over deficit	5	5	*[…] it is important that international students have their own culture and their native way of using English. This might be done through all levels of the university from language policy makers to the teaching staff*

Table II. Interrogating language issues at university: prioritised interventions

to explore through focus group discussion how a group of international students related to and experienced the issues associated with language use for academic writing at university. We chose to model their experience of the language issue through utilising Harré and van Lagenhove (1999) theory of Positioning and Goffman's (1963) theory of Social Stigma. Thus the study had three key purposes developed around the need to understand: how international students positioned themselves in the discourses of language use for academic writing purposes at university; how they personally experienced the issues of language and academic writing as foreign students; and what their thoughts were about what could done to ameliorate any challenges they faced in their university environment. Use of the two theoretical frameworks and the multiple analyses approaches deployed has resulted in important emerging themes from this research. These are summarised in Table III.

Concluding remarks

The generalisability of these findings to the community of international students is highly limited, even undesirable because of the size of sample (12 students) selected

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Broad analytic theme	Emerging sub-ordinate themes	Emerging super-ordinate themes
International students' positioning in the language and academic writing discourses	As contextualised or selective users of English As constrained and marginalised learners As stigmatised foreigners with language deficits	Marginalised university academic tribe
International students lived experience of language and academic writing	The experience of an elusive standard to develop their writing The experience of writing as struggle with conventions, stigmatisation and with their own vulnerabilities	Writing as an experience of forced conformity to vague, inconsistent, questionable and undefined standards
Interventions for ameliorating negative experiences	Staff orientation and development courses Transforming gate keepers to academic life in international universities Changing institutional mindsets and interrogating stigma Development of clearer guidelines for language and academic writing that include privileging difference over deficit Building bridges across academic writing cultures	Interrogating conventions and values that characterise universities' academic writing spaces

Table III.
Modelling international students experience of language and academic writing in universities

from two departments in two schools of one institution. Further the use of focus group has its own internal weaknesses in that participants tend to become influenced by how others may feel and what others suggest as opinions. Despite these limitations, the evidence we acquired seems to confirm the theoretical propositions, which underpinned this study. What seems crystal clear, based on the super-ordinate themes we developed from the data (Table II) is that the academic writing spaces which these international students occupy, are uneven and perhaps even indeterminate. As such, they are unlikely to provide the students with the capital needed to develop their academic writing skills. In these spaces, international students appear to position themselves as a marginalised academic tribe whose struggles are exacerbated by lack of clarity in standards expected and the stigma associated with being seen in deficit terms and not in terms of being different. Such an environment can hardly be seen to be supportive of the value these international students anticipate to derive from their writing experience. The lack of conviction in the value of institutional mechanisms to develop academic writing potential seems to work against the ambition to develop graduates who will go forward with a conviction of the value of their achievements.

It is perhaps simplistic and even inappropriate to make any meaningful recommendations for a way forward. However, what seems clear is that more research is needed in universities to interrogate the academic writing spaces, which international students occupy. Research could, for a start, seek to explore how difference may be privileged over deficit; how the stigma and assumptions associated with international students writing competence may be interrogated; how staff could be better prepared to understand the cultural contexts of international students

and how these can support new writing values; how to define what universities understand to be "good academic English"; and how academic identities can be given space to flourish in diverse but robust ways rather than through pressure to conform.

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