

How effectively and consistently do international postgraduate students apply the writing strategies they have been taught in a generic skills-based course to their subsequent discipline-based studies?

Janet Counsell

Faculty of Business, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tasmania 7000, Australia

Email: janet.counsell@utas.edu.au

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International students comprise 76% of the coursework postgraduate cohort in the Faculty of Business at the University of Tasmania. The traditional pathway for entry to postgraduate courses has been to have an IELTS score of 6. However, the university also has an internal entry pathway via DEAP (Direct Entry Academic Program) which is taught in the English Language Centre. This program has grown in size and popularity and in November 2008 there were 138 students in 9 DEAP classes. This study aimed to have ex-DEAP students identify effective writing strategies and to evaluate whether they used those strategies when tackling writing tasks in their discipline. The first stage was a written questionnaire of 100 items which listed strategies. This was followed up by one-to-one interviews to enable students to expand on their responses. The key findings were that while there was some recognition of the value of the writing strategies that had been taught, their application was not effective or consistent.

Key words: international students, internal pathway, writing strategies.

1. Background

Almost all of the postgraduate students in the Faculty of Business at the University of Tasmania are doing coursework masters (422/434), and the majority of them are international students. Almost half (47% in 2009) of this postgraduate coursework cohort enters the University via the Direct Entry Academic Program (DEAP) which is run by the English Language Centre (ELC). According to the DEAP website (University of Tasmania International, 2010):

DEAP is offered as a 10 or 15 week course and provides excellent language, research and study skills in preparation for coursework or research study at UTAS. Skills for university such as lecture note-taking, text summarizing and paraphrasing will be taught. Students are encouraged to learn independently and to work collaboratively on academic assignments. These assignments include academic essays and reports involving research, referencing and oral presentations.

In Semester 1, 2009, ex-DEAP students represented only 14.1% of the students who came to the postgraduate student academic adviser (PSAA) for the Faculty of Business for individual or group assistance with their writing, even though almost half of the intake into postgraduate coursework have done DEAP in preference to sitting an IELTS test. This proportionally lower use of the PSAA by ex-DEAP students may indicate that the “home grown” DEAP is

particularly effective in preparing students for the academic writing demands of their subsequent studies in an Australian higher education institution, but since no follow-up of ex-DEAP students has been previously made, this conclusion cannot be confidently drawn. Consequently, as indicated in the title, the broad purpose of this study was to determine how effectively and consistently ex-DEAP students apply the writing strategies they have been taught in a generic skills-based course to their subsequent discipline-based studies.

2. What do we know about the English language proficiency and success with academic writing of international students at western higher education institutions?

Paltridge (2004) has provided a thorough, international review of writing requirements at undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study. He uses Moore and Mortons' 1999 study to identify the kinds of writing tasks which Australian universities set. This study revealed that the academic essay represented "just under 60% of the complete set of writing tasks at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This was followed by case study reports, especially at the postgraduate level" (p. 87).

Essays and case study reports are both linguistically demanding forms of writing, and while there is some evidence to support the idea that mere immersion in an English medium university will have an impact on the language ability of international students (Storch & Hill, 2008), the recent proliferation of post-entry language testing for international students however would suggest that disquiet and unease persists about the language abilities of international students, even when they have met the minimum entry requirements via an IELTS test or an internal pathway program such as DEAP. Evidence for this disquiet comes from Dunworth (2009) who reported that at the time of her study, "post-entry language assessments (PELAs) are used in over one third of Australian universities, with a further twelve institutions planning to introduce them" (A1). And while the university where this study is situated does not at this time have a PELA, there has been discussion about the need for one. The establishment of the PSAA position in the Faculty of Business, and its continued funding, is a recognition that many international students, studying at postgraduate level, struggle with the demands of their courses and lecturers are concerned about their progress.

Given the above-mentioned concern about English language proficiency, it is natural to ask what link there is between English language proficiency and subsequent academic success. It is reasonable to assume that some minimum level of competency is required, and consequently Australian universities set minimum English language proficiency entry levels based on the IELTS and other internationally recognised tests such as TOEFL. Many factors affect academic success however, not just English proficiency. There has been some research into the predictive value of IELTS scores. Research by Woodrow (2006) for example, looked at a particular group of postgraduate students, and determined that "English language proficiency as measured by IELTS is moderately predictive of academic achievement in the first semester of study for the student sample in this study" (p. 64). However there is also some evidence that "only the reading module of IELTS was a significant predictor of subsequent academic grades" (Hirsch, 2007, p. 197; Dooley, 1999, p. 1).

Apart from language, other factors which could affect the academic performance of an international student are the demands of settling into life in a new country in a new environment and dealing with personal issues such as homesickness and loneliness. Maturity, motivation and familiarity with the subject and the expectations of the institution are also factors which affect student performance. It is equally possible that changes to educational expectations and teaching styles might be an issue for some students. International students who come to study in Australian universities bring with them the patterns and established learning styles and strategies that have been successful in their home countries. They have expectations about what makes for successful learning, what constitutes a good teacher, and how their work will be assessed. As Biggs (1996) and others have pointed out, we have often misunderstood the learning styles employed by students from Confucian Heritage Cultures. Based on Western

constructs of effective learning and teaching, we have assumed that teacher-centred expository teaching, delivered within a test/exam oriented syllabus encouraged rote learning and memorisation, passive students and surface learning. However, these students have also been extraordinarily successful in their studies in Western, English medium institutions. As Volet (1999) notes, “The negative picture of Asian learners in Australian universities contrasts sharply with evidence from university statistics, which shows that when English language proficiency is not an issue, Asian undergraduate students tend to perform better than local students” (p. 628).

Furthering the above research which questions the assumption that Confucian heritage students are at a disadvantage in Western higher education settings, Wong (2004) looked at the learning styles of 78 international students at an Australian university and found support for the work of Biggs (1996) and Volet and Renshaw (1996), in that “Chinese learners are highly adaptive for learning” (p. 165) and that learning styles “are not culturally based but contextual”. Nevertheless, the research indicates that “adaptation” is necessary. Holmes (2004) for example, looked at a sample of ethnic Chinese students at a New Zealand university and concluded that, “the onus is on these Chinese students to reconstruct and renegotiate their primary culture learning and communicative styles to accommodate another way” (p. 303). Fan Shen (1989) stated this more poignantly, “To be truly ‘myself’, which I knew was the key to my success in learning English composition, meant *not to be my Chinese self at all*” (p. 461).

There has been a substantial amount of research into the adaptations that international students make when faced with the challenges of studying in an English medium university and we know that the process is complex. As Arkoudis and Tran (2007) explain:

the literature reveals that the challenges international students may encounter appear to go far beyond the level of study skills and linguistic forms in writing. More important is the nexus between their own culture-situated interpretations of approaches to knowledge and academic writing, their personal values, and the specific requirements of a distinct discipline regarding these approaches. (p. 158)

To help international students successfully make the transition, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses have been set up to provide international students with some preparation for studying their disciplines in the medium of English, often as an alternative to IELTS. DEAP is such a program. The DEAP final score is a percentage which is given equivalence to an IELTS score. For example, a DEAP final score of 60% is expressed as being equivalent to having scored an IELTS 6. A minimum entry level score is set for every program in the University and the length of the DEAP itself varies between 10 and 15 weeks, depending on the level of English language achievement at entry.

There are many challenges to developing an EAP program which will successfully prepare international students for their subsequent academic writing in a Western institution though. Silva (1993), for example, raised the issue of whether those who are teaching students in EAP courses have accepted the similarities between writing in the L1 and writing in the L2 while ignoring the substantial differences and this has not been resolved. Instead, there has been an expanding body of research “into the social and cultural context which surrounds academic genres” (Paltridge, 2004, p. 92), which has run in parallel with developments in the linguistic field such as the investigation of genres and genre analysis. This field has moved into an investigation of “discourse community members and the situation in which texts are produced” (Bazerman & Prior, 2004, as cited in Paltridge, 2004) and into corpus studies such as the Academic Word List (AWL), compiled by Coxhead (2000), as a starting point for vocabulary learning. Contrastive rhetoric, first defined by Kaplan in 1966, has spawned devotees who have identified “important differences in the ways in which academic texts are written in different languages and cultures” (Paltridge, 2004, p. 93). Opponents of contrastive rhetoric argue that there are many overlapping features of style and rhetorical devices (Leki, 1997, p. 239, as cited in Paltridge, 2004) and that more complex explanations for the choices writers make need to be sought. More recently, researchers have used the term “disciplinary discourses” to describe the

relationships between writers, the audience and the community. Carroll and Ryan (2005) have summed up the situation this way:

Because learning is individually constructed, socially supported, and culturally mediated, learners in unfamiliar social and cultural environments may have difficulty in activating or ‘hooking’ into their existing schemes in order to build new knowledge, especially when the new knowledge is incongruent. (p. 14)

All of the above raises the question as to the relative effectiveness of *generic* EAPs (such as the DEAP) as opposed to *content specific / discipline-based* EAPs for preparing international students for their subsequent studies.

Some support for the efficacy of content-based EAP courses comes from Baik and Greig’s (2009, p. 403) findings which suggest that students value such courses more highly than generic ones and are therefore more likely to attend. Using a cohort of architecture students for their study, Baik and Greig concluded that “students benefit from a discipline-specific approach to language and academic skills support that is based on course content and focused on tasks specific to the discipline in which the students are studying” (p. 414). Bretag (2002) has argued in favour of a content-based program for Thai MBA students at an Australian university based on the positive results obtained, and James (2006) supports the value of a *content-based* EAP from his research in an engineering faculty at an American university. He argues that “learning transfer did occur from the content-based EAP to the students’ other courses” (p. 783).

It is the issue of transfer which has led some to question the potential effectiveness of *generic* EAPs. Baik and Greig (2009, p. 405) for example, claim that there is a lack of evidence that generic EAP courses either improved the skills of international students or that the students transferred their skills from the generic EAP to discipline-specific subjects (p. 405). Since DEAP is a generic EAP course (though it does provide students with the opportunity to use and research sources which are relevant to the students’ interests and their proposed courses), it is thus important to investigate the extent to which students transfer the strategies taught in DEAP successfully to their discipline specific studies. More particularly, the two research questions which formed the focus of this study were:

- Which writing strategies do students recognise as being effective?
- Do they consistently and successfully transfer these strategies to their discipline specific writing?

It is important to note at this point that Mu (2007) has previously investigated “the writing strategies three Chinese post-graduate students report using while writing academic papers in English”. The research of this study to some extent replicates that work, but also extends it by explicitly considering the issue of the transfer of writing practices taught in the DEAP to subsequent academic studies.

3. Methods

Approval to survey ex-DEAP students was obtained in order to uncover which writing strategies they reported using. All of these students were emailed and four expressed a willingness to undertake to fill out a questionnaire and to take part in a follow up interview. The follow-up interviews were taped using an MP3 player. The DEAP text book, *Communication Skills Handbook*, by Summers and Smith (2006), which all students used, was examined in the light of the survey questions about writing. The four participants were all female and all Chinese, and at the time of writing were all postgraduate students in the Faculty of Business. For reasons of confidentiality they will be referred to as Nancy, Cherie, Lucy and Jane.

3.1. The participants

Having completed the 10 week DEAP in 2008, Nancy enrolled in four units in Semester 1, 2009, and achieved three credits and a pass. She sought assistance from the PSAA once in Semester 1. Nancy began formal instruction in English when she was about eight years old. She

has a Chinese degree in accountancy and worked for three years as an accountant in China. Her work colleagues spoke English, particularly in one company, and she communicated with them in English. She is making satisfactory progress in her studies.

Cherie commenced her postgraduate studies in Semester 2, 2008, having completed a ten week DEAP earlier that year. She does not have a Chinese undergraduate degree or a background in business, having trained and worked, for three years, as an interpreter and translator in China. She speaks and reads some Spanish, Japanese and German but has spent the longest period of time studying English. Her formal studies of English began when she was 11 years old and continued for ten years. After that it was self study or work based study but not formal instruction. She has been a regular client of the PSAA, having had at least four appointments during the first semester, and has continued to struggle with her studies.

Lucy's formal study of English commenced when she was 14 years old and continued for 8 years. She completed an undergraduate degree in China in 2006 and then came to Australia the following year, when she did the 15 week DEAP. In Semester 2, 2007, she commenced her studies in the Faculty of Business. Her progress has been uneven, with failures every semester. In Semester 2, 2009, she faced a difficult situation, related to her poor progress, and opted to change her major, thus reducing the number of subjects she needed to study, to comply with the limits set by the faculty.

Jane began learning English in grade 3 and continued through high school and university. She holds an undergraduate degree from a Chinese university as well as an Australian undergraduate degree in commerce. She studied the ten week DEAP in 2008 and commenced her postgraduate study in Semester 1, 2009. She has passed all four of the subjects in which she was enrolled.

3.2. The questionnaire

The questionnaire and follow up semi-structured interview were adapted from the work of Mu (2007), who, as mentioned above, investigated "the writing strategies three Chinese post-graduate students report using while writing academic papers in English". To develop her questionnaire, Mu (2007, p. 26) reviewed the theories of contrastive rhetoric, cognitive development, communication and social constructionism. She then set about the classification of writing strategies into rhetorical, metacognitive, cognitive, communicative and social/affective categories, and devised the taxonomy of 17 micro-strategies shown in Table 1 from those categories. She also developed a 100 item questionnaire, which was in turn adapted from a longer one designed by Victori (1995).

Table 1. A Taxonomy of ESL Writing Strategies (Mu, 2005, as cited in Mu, 2007, p. 107).

No.	Macro-strategies	Micro-strategies (code)
1	Rhetorical	Organisation (O)
2		Use of L1 (UL1)
3		Coherence (C)
4	Metacognitive	Planning (P)
5		Evaluation (E)
6		Monitoring (M)
No.	Macro-strategies	Micro-strategies (code)
7	Cognitive	Generating ideas (GI)
8		Borrowing (B)

Table 1 cont'd

No.	Macro-strategies	Micro-strategies (code)
9	Cognitive (cont'd)	Retrieval (R)
10		Clarification (Cl)
11		Sense of audience (SA)
12		Revision (Rev)
13	Communicative	Avoidance (Av)
14		Reduction (Red)
15	Social/Affective	Cooperation (Co)
16		Resourcing (Res)
17		Reducing anxiety (RA)

To answer the research questions of this study, more adaptations were made to Mu's questionnaire. In contrast to Mu who surveyed her participants in their mother tongue (Chinese) and was primarily concerned with the influence of L1 writing strategies on writing in English, the survey for this research was conducted in English and had a different purpose, which was to identify the influence of the instruction they had received in DEAP on the writing strategies they recognised and used in their discipline-based studies. Consequently, 70 of Mu's original questions were considered to be suited to addressing the purposes of this research and so were used unchanged, while the rest had to be modified and some new ones created (see Appendix A for the full set of questions used). Participants were given a 5 part numeric scale to respond to the questions, from (1) I strongly disagree to (5) I strongly agree. The follow-up interview was intended to elicit some background for each participant and to provide an opportunity to clarify the brief responses to the questionnaire.

4. Results

In this section, the learner responses to the questionnaire and the interview will be examined using the taxonomy of strategies given in Table 1 in order to attempt to answer the two research questions of this study and to identify what the students' strategy use responses might mean for the provision of more effective teaching of international students. Results are organised under the five macro-strategies of Table 1.

4.1. Rhetorical strategies

Nancy's responses to the rhetorical items in the questionnaire indicate that she is aware of the need for organisation and approaches it with some flexibility (eg. writing the introduction last), varying sentence length, using connectors and transitions consciously. When she is unable to find a suitable word, she uses her first language and looks for a translation later.

Cherie came to language study in Australia with a lot of experience of writing in her L1 but does not rate herself as a "good" writer of Chinese, saying that her writing is quite bland, simple and unadorned. When responding to questions about rhetorical strategies she maintained that writing in English is quite different from writing in Chinese, but she is not inclined to rate one as "easier" than the other because her purposes are so different.

Lucy maintains that she has a good deal of experience of writing in her L1 and often writes in it now, with confidence and enjoyment. As a rhetorical strategy, she uses her L1 to think and plan

her English writing, as does Jane, although in the last semester, she found that this was changing, and she was planning in English. When writing in her L1, ideas and accuracy are equally important and she agrees that this is the case in her English writing too. While agreeing that any text needs to be clearly organised she also maintains that ideas can develop as you write. When queried about this in the interview she explained that she spent a lot of time analysing the question but as the writing progressed she sometimes abandoned ideas because she could not develop or explain them clearly in English.

Jane accepts, as do the other three participants, that writing in English must be organised. Similarly, paragraphs should have a unifying idea and sentences should vary in length and complexity. She uses her L1 to think and plan her writing, although this is beginning to change now. Jane eschews the use of direct translation from her L1 because she says that she has realised that this is impossible. The Chinese pattern of thinking is different and the use of proverbs, or as she calls them, “*sentences from history*”, make exact translations impossible.

What can we infer from these responses?

- The influence of the L1 varies.
- Students acknowledge the importance of organisation of content.

In this section dealing with rhetorical strategies, 20% of the responses were neutral, particularly in the sub-category dealing with coherence. These questions asked about technical matters such as the use of connectors, sentence length and transitions from paragraph to paragraph. This finding supported Mu’s (2007) assertion that “these students have difficulties in the use of cohesive devices” (p. 246).

4.2. Metacognitive strategies

Nancy is well aware of the need to plan at the global level, as well as at the local and thematic level. This attention to planning is encouraged in the DEAP by the staged nature of the major writing task and in the text, “writing an assignment requires planning to ensure that all relevant elements have been dealt with and that the finished material is presented logically ...” (Summers & Smith 2006, p. 3). This strategy is also encouraged by the PSAA during consultations. Nancy also specifically mentioned the importance of analysing the question/topic which lecturers, who refer students to the PSAA, often mention as a tactic which many students, not exclusively international students, neglect to do. She also asked both classmates and academic staff for clarification if she did not understand a task or question.

In relation to evaluation and monitoring, this student is positive about the improvement she perceives in her writing over the past year. She values feedback and has sought out additional assistance with grammatical expression (from EnglishAssist, which is this university’s support service for international students) and reads through and edits her own work regularly. She rates the correction of grammar and spelling as secondary to getting the ideas across, although still very important.

Lucy also states that planning is necessary when writing in English, and that she has been taught to do this. She acknowledges that writing is the most difficult of the four macro skills to master and identifies reading widely as a strategy to develop fluent writing, although, in her own case, she has not noticed much change in her writing in the past year. She took another IELTS test to confirm her feelings and had made a 0.5 improvement on her score. Lucy always analyses the topic /question before commencing to write. She believes that it is more important to plan how to improve your writing than examining past errors and she admits to being disheartened when the teacher makes copious corrections to her work.

Like her colleagues, Jane accepts the necessity of a plan and adheres to it. She believes that she learned to write by doing the DEAP, particularly in relation to planning, referencing and structure and also believes that she has learned a lot about writing in the last year and that her writing has improved. She observes the different kinds of writing that are needed in business and law for example, and says that she had to learn that by experience. In her view, error

correction can be done at the end, because, as in her L1, ideas and content are more important than grammar and spelling, and while studying grammar and spelling is the best way to learn a language, reading widely is also important. When it comes down to it though, she agrees that it is more important that her audience understands her ideas than that her sentences are error-free.

Cherie also accepts the need for organisation and the importance of clarity and coherence in any piece of text. Writing is judged by her to be the most difficult of the four macro skills and planning is important. She keeps a checklist of her errors and checks her work for grammatical and spelling errors but maintains that, “*I don’t quite care about grammar and spelling.*” When questioned about this, she explains that it is more important to deal with the ideas first, the content is more important than the grammar and you can make corrections later: “*It does not matter to me if there are lots of mistakes in my writing as long as people understand what I am saying.*”

What can we infer from these responses?

- The importance of English is acknowledged.
- The need for planning is accepted.
- The usefulness of reading is accepted.
- Half of the students gave negative evaluations of their use of their L1 and English.
- There is agreement on the importance of ideas over correctness.
- At least half of these students did not read through their finished work.
- There was not much explicit learning about language during the year.

4.3. Cognitive strategies

Nancy’s responses to questions about the audience/reader were instructive. She reiterated the importance of having a clear purpose in writing and in explaining things clearly to the reader. She accepted that the writer should assume responsibility for the reader’s understanding of the text, a point which is supported again by the text book: “*Essays are not mystery stories, in which the reader waits until the end to find out what it has all been about*” (Summers & Smith, 2006, p. 70). Cherie agreed with two potentially contradictory statements. She agreed that things needed to be explained very carefully to the reader (writer responsible position) while maintaining that it was important to allow the reader to infer meaning. When questioned about this, Cherie explained that while she accepted that some writing was designed to persuade the reader, it was also important to allow room for the reader to make their own meaning.

Lucy acknowledges the importance of the purpose of writing and the need to consider the audience carefully and she made the point that different lecturers had different expectations about written work, and it was important to follow their individual advice about how to present information. When writing in English, she feels more responsibility, “*so I must write simply*” whereas, in Chinese, she has confidence that the reader will understand.

When asked about her attitude to the audience/reader in the interview, Jane recognises the writer’s responsibility in English, “*to do the hard work*”, and make things clear for the reader. She emphasises the need to consider the audience carefully, to think about the purpose of your writing right at the beginning and to write with the assumption that the reader does not know much about the topic. However, this does not mean explaining everything so that the reader does not have any space to infer meaning on their own.

What can we infer from these responses?

- These students accept that the needs of the audience must be considered.
- In both the L1 and English, students identify a responsibility to the reader but the level differs.
- Some students recognise that the expectations of the academic audience (lecturers) are not always the same.
- Students accept that readers will still interpret what they read.

- There is room here for further explication of the writer responsible/reader responsible position.

Revision was an on-going process for Nancy and she used both sentence by sentence and final product revision. When this was followed up in the interview she demonstrated quite a sophisticated understanding of the writing process in that, while there is a general forward movement towards resolution/conclusion, there is also a recognition as Silva (1990, p. 15) explains that, "...writing is a complex, recursive, and creative process or set of behaviours that is very similar in its broad outlines for first and second language writers."

Cherie revised her work regularly, both sentence by sentence and at the end. While she agreed that good writers revise their work several times, she maintained that writing more than one draft could lead to confusion. She also liked to leave her writing for a couple of days before a final edit but tight deadlines and a lack of time meant that this was often not possible.

Lucy claimed that her first and final drafts are very similar. The changes between drafts were usually to do with referencing or adding details but the overall structure did not alter very much. In common with other participants, she also replaced words, which she felt she had used too often, with synonyms, and simplified complex ideas when she wrote in English.

The revision process, according to Jane reflects both the linear and the circular nature of writing in English. Like Nancy, she appears to have quite a sophisticated understanding of the writing process. Jane made the point in her interview that, if she just wrote a linear essay, she might just pass but if she wanted a higher mark, she needed to write in a circular way. When questioned further on this she talked of the need to "*go deeper*" into things, and that "*ideas are the most important thing*" when writing in English. She did not use the terms position or argument but perhaps there was a recognition here that substantiating her ideas by providing more details made for a better piece of writing.

What can we infer from these responses?

- Revision and editing were accepted as being useful strategies
- The revision which took place was often at a superficial level.
- While revision was acknowledged as useful, it was not consistently done.
- Some students grasped that revision involved ideas.
- In general, there was more uncertainty about cognitive strategies than the others.

The large proportion of neutral responses in this section (32%), particularly in the sub-categories of generating ideas, borrowing from other sources, having a sense of audience and the contradictory responses about undertaking revision, indicates areas where explicit instruction may be of benefit to students who are uncertain about how to approach these aspects in their discipline specific writing or who recognise that revision is useful but do not do it. This could be an opportunity for lecturers/language advisers to link brainstorming techniques to specific reading lists for example, in order to identify relevant ideas. It is also a possible opportunity to use the members of a tutorial group or seminar as an audience, to confirm the appropriacy of a text before submitting it for assessment. All students, not only international students, would benefit from feedback from an informed audience. And the feedback could then motivate students to revise their work, in the light of the audience responses.

4.4. Communicative strategies

When reflecting on the communicative strategies she employed, Nancy mentioned the substitution of the L1 (and vice versa when writing in Chinese) if she could not find the word she wanted and the deliberate seeking out of synonyms to replace over-used words. Sometimes she had to give up on an idea because she could not find a way of expressing it or she might simplify a complex idea. She sought out translations but was often dissatisfied with the results, which perhaps explains her claim that, while on the one hand she enjoyed writing in English, she also found it boring. When asked about this contradiction she said it was the time and hard

work required that made writing a chore. She estimated that it took her three times longer to write something compared with her native speaking classmates. She also pointed out that in her Chinese studies the maximum amount she had ever had to write was about 400 words, in contrast to the 700-4000 words she was required to write in Australia.

Under the category of communicative strategies, Jane, like her classmates, uses substitution and avoidance strategies when unable to access an item of vocabulary or when conscious of repetition. Or she may discard some ideas altogether, if she is unable to come up with a suitable way of expressing them.

What can we infer from these statements?

- Insufficient vocabulary is an issue for students.
- Expressing complex ideas in English is a challenge for these students.

4.5. Social/affective strategies

The social/affective strategies Lucy uses include various forms of media/entertainment. While valuing the role of motivation and self confidence, she nevertheless expressed a lack of confidence in her own ability to write in English. She has been a regular user of the PSAA, having come at least seven times in semester 1. She has maintained her desire to improve her written language and sees her main problem as being an inability to distinguish between oral language and the conventions of written English.

Jane puts a lot of effort into her writing and relies on classmates, friends and peers at university and in the community as part of her social/affective strategies. She uses native speakers as a resource to “*help her understand English cultural thinking*” and asks her colleagues to read her work. She reads and uses the media as a resource too, and believes in the value of models for her writing, including the IELTS Task 1 writing template, which she still finds useful if writing about a graph or a table. While she thinks her writing has improved over the last year, she is conscious that her vocabulary has not increased and has not continued to use the AWL or any other overt strategy to develop it. She believes that self confidence and motivation is important to be a good writer and her cooperative strategies assist her to achieve this.

Nancy certainly drew on her friends, classmates and fellow church attendees for assistance, whether it was about a particular task or for social contact. Reading, talking, listening, a part time job, all provided opportunities for support and cooperation. She valued having others read her work, and saw self confidence and motivation as important. Several times in the course of the interview, she used the word challenging when describing her writing and she rather ruefully pointed out that her lack of facility in English writing had prevented her obtaining a scholarship in China, even though she obtained top marks in all her other subjects. She compared learning to write with having learned to swim. She could not swim at all when she started but she persevered. It was a challenge and she was prepared to put in the effort, as she was doing with writing. She believes the DEAP course taught her how to write assignments and provided her with a lot of new vocabulary. The DEAP curriculum is consciously designed to introduce students to the AWL and to make regular learning, revising and testing of vocab an integral part of the course. She has developed her own regime for revising vocab and learning new words and regularly sets herself 50-100 words to review or learn.

Cherie was prepared to ask lecturers/tutors for clarification but not as a first response, for fear of embarrassment. Classmates were her first resource. She also agreed with the value of having other people read her work and provide feedback, although her expressed lack of confidence in writing in English limited the extent to which she did this in practice. Her range of social/affective strategies was very limited and while she maintained that self confidence was important for a writer in any language, she appeared to lack this quality.

What can we infer from these statements?

- Students ask their classmates for clarification but not to read through their work.
- Students identified good resources but did not consistently use them.

- Some students were either unwilling or unable to talk with native speakers.

Overall, 26% of the responses were neutral in this category, particularly in the sub-categories of co-operation and resourcing, which suggests that the university could play a more active role in the provision of opportunities for students to interact with each other and the wider community, to build a sense of belonging to a supportive community.

5. Conclusions

While Mu's (2007, p. 234) study found that all of the strategies except for those in the rhetorical category could be transferred positively from L1 writing to L2 writing, the results of this study were predominantly (75% or more) in the neutral or negative for all categories. This suggests that the DEAP had not strongly influenced the students' ability to recognise effective writing strategies in all cases or to fully transfer these strategies into their discipline specific writing. In some cases, while the students recognised a strategy as being useful (eg. revision), they did not regularly undertake to do it. The DEAP is of relatively short duration (i.e. 10 or 15 weeks), and the students are in the early stages of their courses at the time of interview, so it possible that a time lag exists, where that new learning had not yet been fully consolidated. It is also possible that the transfer of skills from the generic DEAP into the discipline specific studies is not going to occur.

The strategies identified as useful by the participants depended on a number of factors. They responded to the perceived expectations of particular lecturers and the demands of particular disciplines. In other words, they showed themselves to be adaptive learners as Biggs (1996); Volet and Renshaw (1996) and Wong (2004) have claimed. They drew on their personal resources and used learning strategies which were familiar to them. They recognised and accepted as useful many of the strategies taught in the DEAP. For example, in the rhetorical category, planning and organisation was acknowledged as important, while there was a high neutral response to the technical methods of establishing coherence. All students appreciated the importance of ideas in their writing but differed on the significance they attributed to ensuring correctness, monitoring errors and ways of evaluating improvement. These students accepted that revision and editing were useful strategies and they recognised the needs of different audiences.

However, there were still many challenges. These students often did not re-read their work and they were inconsistent in the application of writer responsible techniques. As inexperienced writers, they never mentioned a point of view, an argument or a position as being significant. Arkoudis and Tran (2007) make reference to these challenges. The difficulties experienced by these students in connecting what they had learned in DEAP with the particular demands of the disciplines is further evidence to support Carroll and Ryan's (2005) observations about the challenges in reconciling old and new knowledge and other research findings that *generic* skills did not transfer to specific disciplines (Baik & Greig, 2009; Bretag, 2002; James, 2006). Jane commented that international students "*needed to get English cultural thinking*" in order to succeed. Perhaps a fairer and more inclusive approach would be for universities to ensure that programs like DEAP are able to offer students access to discipline specific content and the opportunities to gain a voice within the discourse community of their chosen discipline. This is one way in which the internationalisation of the curriculum would be advanced and the needs of diverse learners accommodated.

The sample used in this study is too small to draw any definitive conclusions. In the time that has passed since the research was undertaken both Nancy and Jane have completed their courses. Lucy and Cherie have continued to struggle and are currently excluded from further study, based on their lack of academic progress. It is probable that there are multiple factors which have contributed to these outcomes. Cherie was the only one who did not have an undergraduate degree and this has limited her options for transferring to other postgraduate courses, following her difficulties with the accounting course in which she initially enrolled. Certainly both Cherie and Lucy had expressed a lack of interest in accounting and they had no

great desire to work in this field, but Nancy and Jane were not enthusiastic about accounting either. The length of the DEAP program (10 weeks or 15 weeks) did not seem to be a significant factor. Lucy suffered some personal setbacks during the year, but many students encounter relationship problems. All four were similar in age and in cultural background, but it is possible that Nancy and Jane had more social affective resources to draw upon among their friends and acquaintances, as they presented as more outgoing and confident. Their comments about circular writing rather than linear writing may have stemmed from a clearer appreciation of academic style which in turn may have been derived from closer ties with local students and friends who provided a cultural bridge, albeit in an informal way. A future longitudinal study of DEAP students, in which samples of writing are collected and analysed, as well as surveys of attitudes and writing strategies may provide a more complete picture.

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Appendix A

Preliminary questionnaire

The purpose of this survey is to find out what writing strategies you use when writing in your first language and in English. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the items in the questionnaire, so please, answer as frankly as you can, based on what **you** think. Your answers will be kept confidential and will not have any effect on your marks or on anyone's opinion of you. I am using the data to improve the services that I offer to students.

In this questionnaire you will find statements describing feelings about writing and strategies to use when writing. Indicate how accurate each statement is for you by writing a number beside each statement according to the following scale:

- 1 I strongly disagree**
- 2 I disagree**
- 3 I neither agree nor disagree**
- 4 I agree**
- 5 I strongly agree**

- ___1. English is important for my studies and my future career.
- ___2. I learned to write English in Australia in DEAP classes.
- ___3. I read books, magazines and watch TV, DVDs, films and listen to music in English.
- ___4. I mix with native speakers a lot; in my house, socially and at church or sport.
- ___5. Writing in English is the most difficult of the 4 skills (writing, listening, speaking, reading).
- ___6. I write often in my first language.
- ___7. Before coming to Australia to study , I had a lot of experience of writing in my first language.
- ___8. I am confident of my ability to write well in my first language.
- ___9. When I learned to write in my first language I was given models of good writing to copy.
- ___10. When I write in my first language, ideas and accuracy (grammar) are equally important.
- ___11. When I write in my first language, I am always conscious of the reader. (the audience).
- ___12. When I write in my first language, I feel responsible for the reader.
- ___13. Sometimes, when I write in my first language, I use some English words or expressions.
- ___14. In my culture, writing well is a skill which is highly valued.
- ___15. I enjoy writing.
- ___16. I often write in English for pleasure or to communicate with others.
- ___17. Sometimes I use my first language when I am writing in English.
- ___18. I prefer to write in English rather than my first language.
- ___19. When you write in English, it is necessary to plan what you are going to write.
- ___20. I have been taught to plan my writing in English.
- ___21. I always follow my plan strictly.

- ___22. The first thing that I do when I have a writing task is brainstorm or mindmap some ideas.
- ___23. If you know the information, planning is not so important.
- ___24. I always analyse the topic/question before I begin an essay/assignment.
- ___25. If I don't understand the topic/question/task, I ask the lecturer/tutor for clarification.
- ___26. If I don't understand the topic/question/task, I ask my classmates/friends for clarification.
- ___27. Ideas and argument are more important than grammar and spelling in writing in English.
- ___28. Ideas and argument are equally important as grammar and spelling in writing in English.
- ___29. The purpose or reason for writing is very important.
- ___30. The writer has to consider the reader/audience carefully.
- ___31. The writer should be polite and assume that the reader is knowledgeable.
- ___32. The writer should be polite and assume that the reader does not know much about the topic.
- ___33. When I don't know a word in English, I write it in my first language and translate it later.
- ___34. If I can't find the correct English word, I might leave that idea out completely.
- ___35. If I have used a key word many times, I look for a synonym to replace it.
- ___36. I often ask a classmate/friend to read my work and give me feedback on it.
- ___37. I always read through my finished work.
- ___38. I revise my work, sentence by sentence, as I write.
- ___39. I revise my work when it is finished.
- ___40. I always write more than one draft.
- ___41. My first draft is very similar to my final draft.
- ___42. My final draft is very different from my first draft because my ideas have developed as I wrote.
- ___43. All writing in English must have an introduction, the body/development and a conclusion.
- ___44. Sometimes a conclusion is not necessary.
- ___45. I often write the introduction last.
- ___46. Writing is a linear process: you have the ideas, you write, then you revise.
- ___47. Writing is a circular process: you think, you write and you revise at the same time.
- ___48. A good way to develop writing skills is to read a lot.
- ___49. Studying grammar and vocabulary is the most effective way of improving one's writing in English.
- ___50. As we write, we should concentrate both on the content and the grammar.
- ___51. The content is more important than the correct grammar in writing an argument.

- ___52. Each paragraph should have a unifying idea.
- ___53. Sentences should not be too long or too complex.
- ___54. We should use both long and short sentences in an essay.
- ___55. Any text should be organised clearly.
- ___56. Writing should be organised according to existing models: for and against, comparison and contrast, problem and solution etc.
- ___57. We should organise our writing according to common sense, not according to a particular model.
- ___58. The important ideas or arguments should always be presented first.
- ___59. We should write down all of our ideas and link them with connectors.
- ___60. By concentrating on some ideas and connecting them together, the writing is improved.
- ___61. When we read through our work, we should always pay attention to how the ideas are connected from paragraph to paragraph.
- ___62. It is a good idea to keep a checklist of the errors that you commonly make and revise it regularly.
- ___63. It is more important to plan how to improve your writing than to look at the errors that you make.
- ___64. It is a good idea to brainstorm all the ideas and then to write them down quickly before deciding which ones to develop.
- ___65. Once we have some ideas , we should select the main idea and develop that.
- ___66. You can generate ideas by thinking about related topics or by using your imagination.
- ___67. Writers get ideas by interacting with other people and by reading.
- ___68. You can think or plan in your first language.
- ___69. At the beginning we don't always know what we are going to write, because ideas develop as we are writing.
- ___70. We need to have a clear idea and opinion before we start to write.
- ___71. It is OK to borrow ideas from other people because knowledge and ideas belong to everyone.
- ___72. It is not plagiarism if I change the writer's words around or paraphrase it.
- ___73. It is important to consider who is going to read our writing.
- ___74. One should think about the purpose of the writing and the audience right at the beginning.
- ___75. In English writing, it is important to explain things very clearly to the reader.
- ___76. In English writing it is important to allow the reader to infer meaning.
- ___77. The first draft of a piece of writing should be similar to the final draft.
- ___78. Writing one draft is enough because this one contains the important ideas.
- ___79. You can correct the grammar and the spelling once you have revised the ideas.
- ___80. Good writers rewrite papers several times.

- ___81. The less you rewrite the better, because you will begin to get confused.
- ___82. When revising a paper, it is a good idea to leave it for a few days and then re-read it.
- ___83. When you revise a paper, you should do it paragraph by paragraph, looking at the ideas and how they are developed.
- ___84. You can improve your writing by listening or talking with native speakers.
- ___85. When revising, it is a good idea to have other people read our work.
- ___86. If I can't find the proper English word for my idea I would give up that idea.
- ___87. If I have a complex idea I prefer to simplify it when I write it in English
- ___88. It is important to be self confident to be a good writer.
- ___89. I am good at writing in English and in my first language.
- ___90. If you develop more self confidence you will be a better writer.
- ___91. I don't feel so sure of myself when I write in English.
- ___92. Having a strong motivation is important in developing good writing skills.
- ___93. I think writing is a boring activity.
- ___94. I feel disappointed when the teacher/lecturer makes a lot of corrections to my work.
- ___95. It does not matter to me if there are a lot of mistakes in my writing as long as people understand what I am saying.
- ___96. You need to read and write a lot to develop writing fluency.
- ___97. I put a lot of effort into writing in English.
- ___98. In the last year I have learned a lot about writing in English.
- ___99. I think my writing is better now than it was a year ago.
- ___100. I have not noticed much change in my writing over the last year.

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY.

(This survey was adapted from one designed by Mu Congjun for her PhD study, "An investigation of the writing strategies three Chinese post-graduate students report using while writing academic papers in English." Queensland University of Technology.)