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## Reasoning patterns of undergraduate theses in translation studies: An intercultural rhetoric study

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### ABSTRACT

ESP/EAP professionals, by focusing on issues that arise from instructional practice in Anglo-American nations, have unwittingly perpetuated a deficit model in teaching and researching academic writing in other parts of the world. Students' writing is often measured against the language standards in those "center" nations. An intercultural rhetoric framework suggests that we need to view English writing as a local practice in which students appropriate resources from various "small cultures" (Holliday, 1999). Further, representing writing practice outside of Anglo-American contexts in research requires a dialectical process, negotiating between local and translocal frames and concepts. Adopting this rhetorical framework, we examined the reasoning patterns of 75 highly rated undergraduate theses in translation studies at a Chinese university. Our study reveals that the thesis writing community has established its own language standards and the students appropriate these standards to fashion their reasoning styles. Further, they marshal additional resources from national, professional-academic, and instructional cultures. We conclude by offering suggestions for teaching and researching thesis writing in non-English dominant contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

In the field of ESP, compared with the abundant research in post-graduate theses, studies on undergraduate degree papers have been ostensibly scanty. The long recognized reason for lack of attention to this population comes from the belief that undergraduate research transmits received wisdom rather than creates new knowledge (Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz, & Nunan, 1998; Grobman & Kinkead, 2000; Schwegler & Shamon, 1982). Published research in undergraduate thesis writing has centered around two areas. First, a few studies have examined the textual features of undergraduate theses (Feng & Zhou, 2007; Hyland, 2002). For example, Hyland (2002) studied the use of personal pronouns in 64 Hong Kong undergraduate theses. By comparing with a corpus of research articles and interviewing students and their supervisors, Hyland identified significant underuse of authorial reference in contexts that involved making arguments or claims. Second, some studies reported teaching programs that provided thesis writing training to undergraduate students (Paltridge, 1997; Skillen & Purser, 2003; Sun, 2004). For instance, Skillen and Purser (2003) outlined the strategies and techniques that the Learning Department of an Australian university used to teach thesis writing, and they explained the impact of its practices on students

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and supervisors. Often those teaching programs draw on research in thesis writing in general and develop strategies and techniques for both undergraduate and graduate students.

While existing scholarship in thesis writing has benefited instructors and students by improving pedagogy, it focuses primarily on issues arising from instructional designs in Anglo-American nations. As an illustration, Kwan (2006) sought to revise the popular belief in Anglo-American thesis writing manuals that the introduction and literature review sections are structurally the same. She identified the nuanced structural dissimilarities between the two sections through an analysis of 20 doctorate theses in applied linguistics. However, Kwan's sample is exclusively drawn from the Anglo-American context, with all the thesis writers being "native English speakers." For the few studies that investigate non-Anglo-American students, the research emphasis remains centered on a demographic that has educational experience in Anglophone countries (Paltridge, 1997; Richards, 1988). For example, after perceiving ESL students' difficulties in undertaking thesis writing tasks in Australia, Paltridge (1997) put forward an experimental writing program that aimed to assist these students in meeting institutional demands. While such studies are useful, they reinforce the educational concerns of Anglo-American nations. The use of English to create knowledge through thesis writing in non-English dominant contexts is largely overlooked.

Along with the focus on English-dominant nations is an inclination among ESP practitioners to fall back on prescriptivism—that is, to assume the linguistic and academic standards of these "center" nations as the "norms." Though few scholars openly declare that the writing produced by "native speakers" is better or more correct, their assessments are often based on the premise that any writing that falls short of meeting the Anglo-American conventions is unsatisfactory. When discussing rhetorical patterns in academic writing, Leki (1991) summarized this perspective: "In English we write like this; those who would write well in English must look at this pattern and imitate it" (p. 123). Current ESP/EAP scholarship on thesis writing is not far from this perspective, as Kwan's (2006) corpus analysis attests: post-graduate theses written by native speakers are the source from which thesis writing manuals should draw to update their content. While Paltridge (1997) and other scholars are invested in tailoring instructional designs to ESL/EFL student needs, they are at the same time perpetuating, however unwittingly, a deficit model, which fails to consider the linguistic resources and rhetorical savvy that multilingual students bring to academic writing (Canagarajah, 2002).

This deficit model has influenced the teaching of academic English writing in non-English dominant countries, most notably that related to rhetorical patterns. Teachers tend to give predominant attention to a deductive pattern (variously called *linear*, *general-specific*, *thesis-elaboration*, or *topic-particular*), presenting it as the preferred pattern among "native speakers" (Petrić, 2005; Walker, 2006; Xing, Wang, & Spencer, 2008; Yang, 2012; Yoshimura, 2002). For example, Petrić (2005) designed a short writing course for Russian students to raise their awareness of cultural differences in argumentative writing, focusing on thesis statement. The results, presented by Petrić as positive, were essentially conformity to the "native speaker" standard: essays written after the course were found to have all used a thesis statement, positioned the statement mostly in the introduction, and showed less variation in the thesis statement sentence structure and lexical choices than before the course.

The problems of focusing on the thesis statement, and hence on a deductive pattern, are multifold. First, argumentative or academic essays written in English do, in fact, embrace diverse reasoning patterns (Braddock, 1974; Heilker, 1996). With exclusive attention given to a deductive pattern, students are deprived of opportunities to learn other reasoning styles. Second, prioritizing the rhetorical preferences of the idealized "native speakers" creates a dichotomized, essentialized view of peoples and their language practices (Kubota, 1999, 2001). Students are made to believe that, as "non-native speakers," the rhetorical preferences of their community must be different, undesirable, and thus to be avoided in English writing (Zhao, 1995). Third, students' own rhetorical adroitness may be overlooked; they are discouraged from cultivating their own reasoning styles that can be equally, if not more, powerful for their audiences and communicative purposes (Zamel, 1997).

Departing from the deficit model, the present study examines the reasoning patterns of undergraduate theses in translation studies at a Chinese university. Studies on undergraduate education in translation studies are plentiful, including those published in the international journals *Interpreter and Translator Trainer* and *Translation and Interpreting Studies*. These studies have largely focused on teaching students about translation theories and developing students' translation and interpreting skills. However, we are not aware of any studies that have examined how undergraduates participate in knowledge making in translation studies through thesis writing. To pursue the present study, we will first lay out our methodological framework.

## 2. Studying thesis writing in an intercultural rhetoric framework

To avoid the deficit model, and to appreciate the rhetorical prowess of multilingual writers, a number of scholars have proposed an intercultural rhetoric framework (Belcher & Nelson, 2013; Canagarajah, 2006a; Connor, 2008, 2011; Kubota, 2010; Kubota & Lehner, 2004). For ESP, this framework consists of three tenets: English as a local language practice; culture as multifaceted, dynamic, and fluid; and representation of non-Western writing practice as a dialectical process.

First, in the intercultural rhetoric framework, English is not viewed as a static, monolithic entity, but an evolving, living language with many varieties (Canagarajah, 2006b; Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011; Matsuda & Matsuda, 2010; You, 2008, 2010, 2011). This conception derives from the work of Kachru (1986), who recognized the inadequacy of English teaching based on native-speaker norms and put forth a three-concentric-circle model of World Englishes. In his model, the Inner Circle encompasses the areas where people use English as their first and often sole language for social interaction; the Outer Circle is defined by its post-colonial legacy, where people adopt English as a second language for intranational uses; and the Expanding Circle is the rest of the world, where English is used as a foreign language for purposes of contact with people

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