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Writing Class as an Activity System: Master's Theses as Social Texts

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ABSTRACT: *Learning to write in a classroom setting needs to be examined in relation to the elements in the writing class. Following cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), this study examined a master's thesis writing class for international master's students in a TESOL program in the U.S. The findings show that diverse mediating tools, such as the shared home language and specialized digital software, empowered students to bridge gaps in their existing knowledge. Framing academic integrity as a rule rather than a punitive measure encouraged students to adopt strategies that improved the quality of their work. The system's division of labor provided emotional support and fostered a sense of community, which was essential for the successful completion of the capstone project. Ultimately, an activity system approach transforms the daunting task of thesis writing from an isolated cognitive struggle into a supported, collective endeavor, making an individually owned capstone work a social text.*

Keywords: activity system, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), international master's students, thesis writing, writing class

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INTRODUCTION

Social practice theorists view literacy as a set of practices that are situated in particular sociocultural contexts (Barton, 1994; Street, 1995). Academic writing, one important form of literacy, is also situated in specific sociocultural contexts (Lillis, 2001; Lillis & Scott, 2007), and writers' practices are likely influenced by sociocultural factors (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Therefore, writing scholars advocate viewing learning as intersected by different elements surrounding a writer, including formal class settings.

A writing class is typically composed of an instructor who leads the class and students who participate in the learning activities to achieve the learning outcomes following the instructor's guidance. In addition to these agentive humans, it also includes institutional rules that guide the class activities and tools that facilitate the completion of the activities. Therefore, Bazerman (2023) advocated recognizing the classroom as an "organized activity system" (p. 418) and learning to write as "text-mediated networks of activity" (p. 419). Similarly, Seloni (2022) argues for the application of activity theory to analyze the teaching of L2 writing, "*activity theory* as a potentially meaningful analytical framework to understand how teachers adaptively teach L2 writing" (p. 1, with original emphasis).

Specifically, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1999), the newer generation of activity theory, with its focus on sociocultural context, has great advantages in examining learning to write. As Russell (1997) suggested, CHAT can "theorize and trace the interaction among people and the inscriptions called texts (and other material tools) without separating either from collective, ongoing motivated action over time" (Russell, 1997, p. 509). In other words, this perspective allows for the examination of how genres (like the thesis) act as "malleable forms" that are mediated by social action.

Increasingly, CHAT has been used to analyze individual learners' writing processes to reveal the multifaceted factors influencing learning (e.g., Lei, 2008; Ren & Zhu, 2023). These studies have shown that institutional standards, disciplinary conventions, and available tools all come into play during writing processes. However, existing research tends to focus on individual learners, which can overlook the collective element of a writing class.

Viewing the classroom as an activity system shifts the unit of analysis from the individual to the collective, object-oriented community, making visible how subjects, tools, rules, and the division of labor interact. Viewing the classroom as an activity system also shows how the instructor's pedagogical choices mediate the relationships among these elements to transform thesis writing into a shared endeavor. It also provides teachers with a framework to scaffold instruction that helps students better navigate the implicit norms of academic writing. To address this gap, we utilized CHAT to examine a thesis writing class for international master's students in a TESOL program in the U.S.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to investigate the writing classroom as a site of mediated social practice. Vygotsky (1978) argued that the relationship between a human subject and the environment is mediated by cultural artifacts, primarily language and tools, which comprise the original activity theory. An activity system is typically presented as a triangle that involves a subject, an agent performing the activity (e.g., a student), and an object, the goal or motive that drives an activity (e.g., an essay) using tools, materials or artifacts that shape the way the subject interacts with the object. Leont'ev (1981) expanded Vygotsky's model by distinguishing between individual "actions" and collective "activity." He illustrated this through the primeval collective hunt, where the actions of individual beaters make sense only when viewed through the collective goal of the hunt. This introduced the elements of community and the division of labor into activity theory.

Engeström (1987) further developed activity theory, recognizing that learning and writing occur at the intersections of different systems, such as the student's home culture, the university's institutional rules, and the disciplinary community's expectations. The emphasis on sociocultural contexts underscores the need for cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). Accordingly, the classic subject–activity–object triangle is extended to include rules, division of labor, and community (Engeström, 1999). Rules refer to the explicit and implicit norms, conventions, and regulations that constrain or guide individual and collective actions within an activity system. The division of labor refers to how tasks, responsibilities, and authority are distributed among participants in an activity system. Community refers to a group of individuals who share the same general object and are engaged in the same activity.

From the perspective of CHAT, a writing classroom is the result of interactions between academic conventions, institutional policies, and the roles of students and instructors. Writing is a process during which students engage in the activity by assuming their roles and following the rules to complete the object and, eventually, to negotiate their entry into a disciplinary community. Russell (1997) further proposed the construct of "appropriation" (p. 513) to describe how a novice subject in an activity system engages in the activity. Learning to write involves a process of appropriating routinized "tool-in-use." Thus, tools, such as sample texts and technological tools, carry the historical sediment of the culture that created them, influencing the writer's choices.

CHAT served as an analytic lens for data analysis. The elements of the activity system functioned as categories that guided our coding: The constructs of tools, rules, division of labor, and community provide the categories to organize the initial codes, helping us see the classroom as an activity system. Thus, by adopting CHAT, this study shifts the unit of analysis from the individual writer's cognitive process to a collective, object-oriented writing class.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The transition from viewing writing as a purely cognitive process to a situated sociocultural practice has led researchers to increasingly adopt activity theory or cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) as a framework (Klein & Boscolo, 2016) to analyze literacy practices. The body of empirical research on writing focuses mainly on individual writing strategies, disciplinary socialization, and pedagogical tensions.

Research has utilized CHAT to explore how individual learners navigate writing tasks within specific contexts. For instance, Lei (2008) identified four types of mediated strategies, namely, artifact-, rule-, community-, and role-mediated strategies, to show how proficient English learners at a Chinese University engaged in the writing process. Other studies also use CHAT to explore the tools used by students. For example, Kessler (2020) explored the mediating tools for two Chinese doctoral students at a U.S. university to complete their assignments. More recently, Ren and Zhu (2023) analyzed the activity system of a Chinese undergraduate's thesis writing in terms of tools, rules, community, and division of labor (or roles). These studies focus on how individual motives and perceptions shape the writing process.

Research has also used CHAT to examine disciplinary socialization. For instance, Fujioka (2014) analyzed the interactions between an L2 student and a professor, illustrating how their respective activity systems, one focused on learning and the other on teaching, mutually shaped each other through disciplinary writing assignments. In the context of doctoral students, Lei and Hu (2019) explored the tensions that doctoral candidates face in their dual roles as both students and emerging expert scholarly writers. Furthermore, Goldsmith and Willey (2016) investigated how the teaching of writing is marginalized in engineering, although students need writing development to meet the expectations of their disciplinary community. These studies highlight the complex, often conflicting, demands that students face as they move across different academic and professional activity systems.

Recent research has also applied activity theory to examine the affordances of technology in learning development. Rahimi et al. (2025) drew on activity system to investigate how an online platform functioned as a mediating artifact for EFL learners, reporting that the immediacy and affordances of automated written corrective feedback shaped students' behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement and supported a gradual shift from other-regulated to self-regulated writing. Wang et al. (2024) used activity theory to examine the correlations between elements of the system and EFL students' argumentative writing performance in a blended writing class and reported that five factors—subject, object, rules, community, and division of labor—are positively correlated with writing performance. Beyond writing, Artemova (2024) applied activity theory to review the integration of AI in education to show which relationships in the educational activity system have received attention. The findings show that research has concentrated on exploring the relationships between the subject-tool, tool-object, and tool-community relationships, while the central subject-object

relationship remains largely underexplored. These studies demonstrate the value of activity theory for illuminating how technological tools mediate writing and learning more broadly.

Research focusing on the classroom as a site of collective activity often centers on the contradictions or tensions that arise during pedagogical shifts. For instance, Mak and Lee (2014) examined the implementation of “assessment for learning” (AfL) in Hong Kong classrooms and used CHAT to identify how examination-oriented institutional rules contradicted new pedagogical goals. They reported that teachers’ attempts to foster student autonomy and self-reflection were often inhibited by a deeply entrenched examination culture.

To conclude, the existing research using CHAT tends to focus on individual learners’ activity systems or student–teacher dyads. Research that treats the classroom as one activity system is lacking. The present study addresses this gap by examining how a writing class for international master’s students functions as an activity system. The findings provide a more robust understanding of how academic writing, such as master’s theses, is produced within a shared academic context.

METHODOLOGY

To examine how a writing class can function as an effective activity system through pedagogical design to support students’ writing, we conducted a case study. We used purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012) and selected a master’s thesis writing class for international students in a TESOL program at a private research university in the U.S. (pseudonymized as Research University). The required capstone is a literature review of at least 30 pages, following the conventions of the APA.

Data Sources

After receiving IRB approval for this study, we invited all the students enrolled in the course and the instructor, Rebecca (pseudonym), to participate in the study by email, and attached the information letter. Rebecca and her 12 students agreed to participate in the study. All participants were female students from China who had earned a bachelor’s degree in China.

The first author observed the class meetings for one semester to understand the instructor’s pedagogical practices. The first author also took extensive descriptive fieldnotes during class observations, documenting the class interactions and how the students engaged in learning about writing the thesis.

The first author conducted two interviews with the instructor to understand her perspectives on literacy learning and her experience of teaching this class. The first author also interviewed students twice, one at the beginning of the semester to learn about their academic writing experiences and again at the end of the semester to learn about their perception of their learning and the writing class. All interviews were recorded with the participants’ permission.

We collected the course materials and other relevant documents because they were artifacts of the activities. We compared student drafts in different stages of thesis writing to determine how they responded to peer and instructor feedback. The documents we collected include the thesis guidelines, the course syllabus, the evaluation rubric, and the instructor's PowerPoint slides. These documents constituted part of the sociocultural context of writing.

Data Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis of the data using the lens of CHAT to guide our interpretation, using NVivo 15, qualitative data analysis software. Following Corbin and Strauss (2015), we conducted an initial open coding of interview transcripts and fieldnotes by assigning short, descriptive labels to segments of text. For example, an instructor explaining the scope of a proposal using a Chinese saying was coded as "using Chinese to teach." This line-by-line process generated an initial set of codes, such as "using Grammarly" and "worrying about plagiarism."

Conceptualizing the writing class as an activity system, we then refined the initial codes into categories to identify specific instances of the elements of the activity system, including the mediating tools, rules, and the division of labor. For instance, the codes "using Chinese to teach" and "using Grammarly" were clustered into mediating tools, whereas "worrying about plagiarism" was grouped under rules.

Finally, we examined the interaction between these elements to understand how the instructor's pedagogical approaches impacted student actions. This process helped us understand how these elements interact to transform the object of thesis writing into a social endeavor.

To ensure trustworthiness, we employed data triangulation by cross-referencing observations, interview data, and textual artifacts. For instance, themes regarding plagiarism were identified in class observations and corroborated by student interview responses and revisions in their thesis drafts.

FINDINGS

The elements of the writing class as an activity system are depicted in Figure 1. The subjects were the instructor and the students enrolled in this class. The object, or "the problem space" (Russell, 1997, p. 511), was to write a thesis, in this case, a stand-alone literature review on a topic in the discipline of education. The instructor's pedagogical design orchestrated the dynamics of the system, allowing students to exercise agency through the use of specific tools, rules, and divisions of labor. Through activities mediated by these elements designed by the instructor in the system, students achieved the object specified in the syllabus: "By the end of the course, students will have a full draft of their thesis completed" (p. 1).

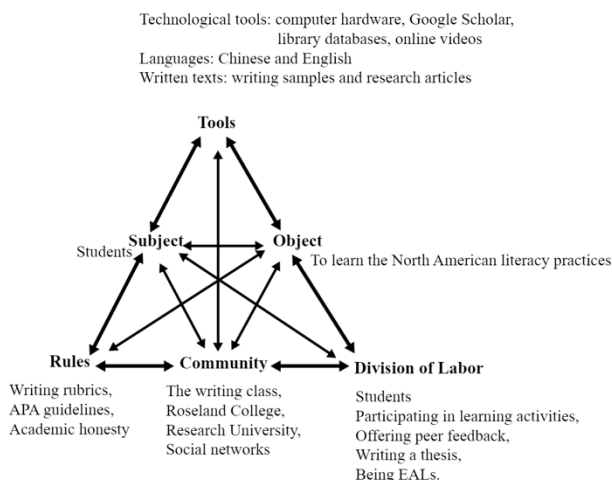


Figure 1: Elements in the Thesis Writing Class as an Activity System

Mediating Tools: Boosting Student Agency

In this class system, the instructor legitimized a variety of tools, which helped students bridge the gap between their existing knowledge and new academic demands. Tools may have a material form, as with artifacts, or may be abstract, as with language or signs (Russell, 1997). The choice of one tool over another depends on many factors, such as its availability, legitimacy, and ease of use. In the class, Rebecca made some tools, such as Chinese language and writing samples, available; she also recommended technological tools, such as reference management software and digital mind mapping tools. These tools mediated the students' learning process and helped them achieve the object: completing a thesis.

Technology as a Channel

With the advancement of educational technology, an increasing number of technological tools, such as software and large language models, can mediate learning in an activity system. At the beginning of the semester, Rebecca recommended that students use digital tools to organize their reading notes:

There are also some online graphic organizers. I did use one, like this one is called Mindmap. You can just sign for free. You will start to see different themes or different topics. I used it to organize my notes when I worked on my book. (Class Observation, Week 2)

In response to Rebecca's recommendation, several students used this tool to organize their reading notes, as shown in Figure 2.

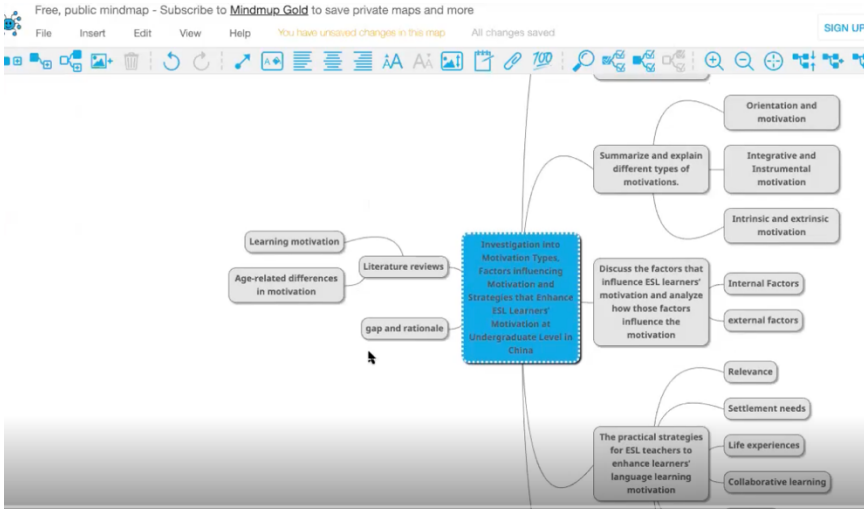


Figure 2: Example of a Student Using Digital Tools to Organize Themes

Here, one student used the digital tool recommended by the instructor to categorize the findings of the research articles she read, which later became the themes of her thesis.

Rebecca also recommended that students use other tools: “Technology makes learning easy. Even YouTube has many academic writing resources. Make full use of them” (Class Observation, Week 3). These tools, including digital mind-mapping applications, YouTube, and online citation guides, helped students organize the research literature into coherent themes, which then served as the foundation for structuring their theses. They also helped students verify their work against disciplinary standards. In other words, technology serves as a bridge connecting their writing to disciplinary practices by making the norms and standards visible and accessible.

Language as a Cognitive Scaffold

Language is an important mediating tool in an activity system (Engeström, 1999). As the course outcome was to complete a thesis in English and the course took place in the U.S., English was an important mediating tool for class meetings, assigned readings, Blackboard discussion posts, and students’ written assignments. However, Chinese was observed in class and reported by students as a powerful mediating tool in helping them learn thesis writing practices.

Rebecca used Chinese metaphoric phrases several times to help students understand specific literacy practices in English-medium academic writing. For example, in discussing the possible scope of a topic for a literature review in Week 1, Rebecca said:

The topic should be neither too narrow nor too broad. Like when you describe somebody, in the Chinese poem, 增之一分则太长, 减之一分则太短 [Add a tenth of an inch and she is too tall; take away a tenth of an inch and she is too short]. Nothing more, nothing less, that's the best. (Class Observation, Week 2)

The verses in Chinese describe the beauty of a maiden whose height was perfectly proportionate to her body shape. In this case, because Chinese was the shared home language of Rebecca and the students, she drew on this famous Chinese poem to help students understand the appropriateness of a thesis topic.

The instructor's practice of using Chinese seemed to consolidate the legitimacy of Chinese when writing a thesis in English. During the interviews, the students also reported using Chinese as a mediating tool, as Yubel shared:

When doing reading, I sometimes, I would just copy them [some English sentences], and then I would translate them into Chinese. When I wrote my thesis, I would first draft in Chinese and translated the Chinese into English. (Second Interview)

Using Chinese helped Yubel understand ideas in English. Afterward, when she wrote, she generated ideas from her Chinese reading notes and translated these ideas into English.

As these examples show, students' home language served as a mediating tool to help them learn academic literacy in English. Research has also shown the positive mediating effect of students' home language on their English writing. For instance, the Chinese students in Li's (2013) study browsed Chinese-medium webpages for information and read Chinese research articles when writing a course paper in English. Similarly, the two Chinese doctoral students in Kessler's (2020) study used their home language to generate ideas when they wrote in English.

Text Modeling

Material artifacts in an activity system can mediate learning by reifying practices (Russell, 1997). In this study, material artifacts included the writing samples provided and research articles recommended by Rebecca. Writing samples reify the instructor's expectations, whereas journal articles represent disciplinary writing conventions and provide content knowledge. Text modeling reduces the abstract cognitive demands of a genre to an observable manifestation, making writing tasks more manageable (Wette, 2014). Using them as reifications of instructor expectations, students gain a clear understanding of the target to work toward.

With respect to major assignments, Rebecca provided a sample for students to reference. Students modeled after the samples, as Joan described:

Rebecca will provide an article written by previous students, so it can help me know what final results she wants us to achieve, and then maybe

what kind of work she is satisfied with. I will work toward that. (Second Interview)

While Rebecca's detailed assignment descriptions explained her expectations, the samples functioned as reifications of these expectations.

Furthermore, Rebecca recommended that students use journal articles effectively to develop content knowledge and learn academic writing practices. For instance, during one class session, Rebecca asked students to identify the reporting verbs in research articles: "Now, take one of the research articles and circle the verbs in the literature review section, and then share what patterns you have observed" (Class Observation, Week 8). She commented, "Peer-reviewed journal articles are of good quality. You can learn their writing practices." Students reported that from reading and analyzing journal articles, they learned about various aspects of writing. For instance, Quina reported using journal articles as models when writing the introduction to her thesis:

I was not sure how to write the introduction at the time. Then I read the research literature to see how they did it and noticed that they all started with the background and narrowed down to their research topics. So, I just followed suit. (Quina, Second Interview)

Thus, journal articles mediated students' writing by providing examples of language in use (reporting verbs) and helping them learn the rhetorical moves included in specific sections.

Rule-mediated Writing: Building Academic Integrity

In academic contexts, students typically see rules as important because their learning outcomes are usually evaluated against these rules (Russell, 1997). For example, students might refer to the syllabus, assignment descriptions, and evaluation criteria as the rules of a class. The rules may also extend beyond the instructor's expectations to include university policies and disciplinary conventions. In this writing class activity system, academic integrity served as a central rule. Students' awareness of the rules transformed the intimidating concept of plagiarism into strategies that enhanced the quality and integrity of their work.

Upholding academic integrity, a core academic policy across institutions of higher education, is also among the central rules in this class system. Although Rebecca did not believe that students would intentionally plagiarize, she was concerned that they might do so accidentally: "I trust them that they won't intentionally do that, but I have to be very mindful of accidental plagiarism" (Second Interview). Thus, she warned students many times in class that "I can never overstate the significance of accidental plagiarism. And now make sure you are aware of that at the very beginning" (Class Observation, Week 1).

While Rebecca was mindful of "accidental plagiarism," her focus was not on punishment but on awareness. This approach empowered students to adopt strategic practices to protect the integrity of their writing. For example, Yura

developed a protoreference list in her drafts, copying exact words and page numbers. When asked why she did this, she explained:

She [the instructor] highlighted accidental plagiarism. Sometimes, we forget whether they are exact words. So, I want to like, copy and paste the exact words from the articles, and also the page number so I can have the right citation to make sure that I won't plagiarism.... (Second Interview)

Here, Yura's practice of including the page numbers of copied sentences showed her awareness of avoiding plagiarism.

Students' awareness was also manifested in the revisions they made to their texts, such as Gabi adding quotation marks and page numbers to original source words, as Example 1 shows:

Example 1 Revision across Gabi's Drafts

Draft 1: Findings from brain research also indicate that students' abilities vary as they are in different levels of emotional safety, appropriate challenge and self-constructed meaning (Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998).

Draft 2: Findings from brain research also reveal students' individual difference from perspectives of "emotional safety, appropriate challenge and self-constructed meaning" (Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998, p. 52; emphasis added).

Gabi explained the reason for adding quotation marks and page numbers, as shown in italics in the revised version: "They are the original words. So, I added the page number to avoid plagiarism" (Second Interview). The instructor's reiteration of avoiding plagiarism helped Gabi raise her awareness of following APA conventions, distinguishing direct quotations from paraphrases.

Research has extensively reported that international students, especially those from Asian countries, often lack awareness of avoiding plagiarism when they engage in source-based writing because of different expectations and understandings of plagiarism (e.g., Lombardi, 2021). The instructor's practice of highlighting the importance of academic integrity helped to increase students' awareness of avoiding plagiarism.

By framing plagiarism as a rule to be navigated rather than just a penalty to be feared, students adopted strategic practices to follow academic conventions. Students such as Yura and Gabi developed strategies to avoid plagiarism, which significantly improved the quality of their theses.

Division of Labor: From "Fighting Alone" to Collective Success

As people assume different roles, subjects in an activity system can undertake multiple divisions of labor (Russell, 1997). In this study, the most obvious division of labor was between the instructor and the students: the instructor delivered mini-lectures, and the students fulfilled the learning objects and served

as peer reviewers. The system functioned as a support network that ensured the completion of the thesis. It also shifted the writing of the thesis from a lonely, daunting task to a manageable, collective endeavor.

The Instructor: Scaffolding and Emotional Support

Rebecca's role included deconstructing the complex genre of a thesis into practical, manageable steps, such as finding sources, drafting a proposal, and writing individual sections. In each session, she would give a mini-lecture, using PowerPoint slides to facilitate her teaching. The mini-lectures covered a wide range of topics, including how to identify a topic, how to search for relevant literature, how to craft a title, reading strategies, different types of citations, how to report and synthesize the literature, various verb tenses, and editing and revising practices (Class Observations). The lectures appeared to play a pivotal role in facilitating students' acquisition of effective writing practices, as evidenced by students' comments during the interviews. They acknowledged the course as the first systematic instruction on academic writing they had ever received (Student Second Interviews).

Additionally, Rebecca is very empathetic to students' challenges and often draws on the cultural bonds between herself and the students, as she had been an international PhD student from China before she became a faculty member. As a result, Rebecca stressed that this thesis writing seminar provides not only content knowledge of academic writing but also emotional support:

So, I want to be there, because I'm their advisor. I want to be there to walk them through this whole process. I sometimes encourage them; sometimes I say, "I will do a little hand-walking, but I also want you to walk independently because that is what you have to do." So emotional support. (First Interview)

Rebecca showed her understanding of students, "I want to walk you through this process. I know it's getting difficult. It's probably more difficult than you expected when you are actually doing the writing thing. So, we'll do that together" (Class Observation, Week 4). "Doing that together" stands out during most of the class sessions, and thus, writing the thesis was no longer an isolated project but a collective endeavor. For instance, when Yura shared that she did not feel confident about editing her draft, the instructor supported her:

No worries, if you don't think you're good at self-editing, we can help you. Don't make it just yourself. Of course, it is your responsibility. But you should still be able to rely on other people to a certain extent. It's such a big project. (Class Observation, Week 12)

Students benefited from the instructor's "hand-walking" and emotional support, which alleviated the anxiety of producing their first long-form academic paper. Knowing that they had the instructor to rely on and their classmates to seek help from, students felt that the thesis writing was challenging but manageable.

On the other hand, without support and peers, thesis writing could be very intimidating and lonely. Evidence of this was found in the case of one student. Yubel was the last to complete the thesis. She sent her thesis to the professor during the next semester, whereas her classmates submitted their theses by the end of the semester. During the interview, she lamented that she should have followed the course schedule to finish the thesis, as writing the thesis was more challenging when she lagged behind and wrote alone, in her words, “fighting alone” (Yubel Second Interview). This contrast highlights how the classroom activity system functions as a support network to ensure that students achieve the object.

The Instructor: Connecting to Students’ Cultural Identity

By drawing on students’ cultural knowledge and using metaphors such as “cooking rice” or “killing a dragon,” Rebecca helped students connect the writing process to their own lives. This helped students develop their writer identities in a genre that often leaves little space for personal or cultural expression.

As an experienced instructor, Rebecca understood the importance of connecting writing to students’ lives: “Learning to write is not fun for many students. Connecting learning to students’ life will help them understand the concepts better and make learning more interesting” (Second Interview). During class, she put her perspectives into practice.

In Week 3, Rebecca used some cartoons to explain what thesis writing looked like, as shown in Figure 3:

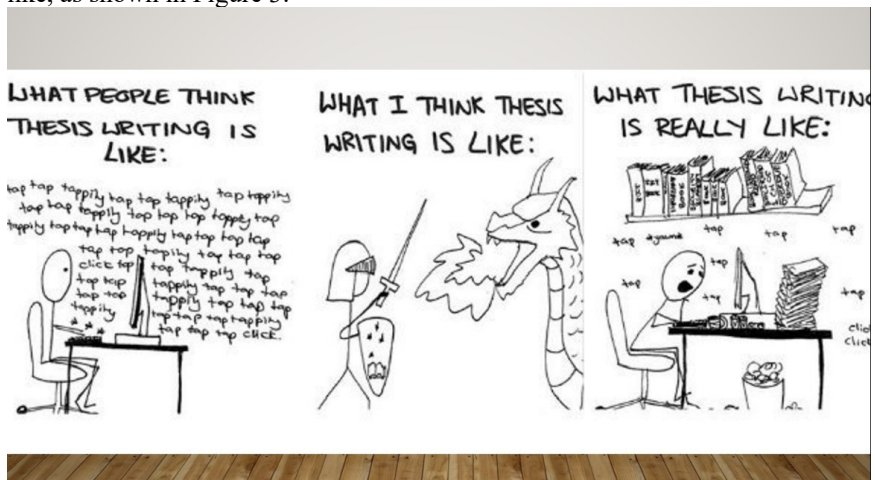


Figure 3: Class Slides Showing Cultural Differences

In this image, a warrior is fighting a dragon that is spitting fire. In Chinese culture, a dragon is regarded as a holy creature and is worshipped by Chinese people as they believe that they are its descendants. Chinese students would feel very uncomfortable if a dragon were depicted as a monster. Rebecca was very sensitive

to this and commented, “Writing is like killing a dragon. That’s definitely a Western ideology. We would definitely use a different animal. It’s like a monster; you are fighting it” (Class Observation, Week 3).

Similarly, when addressing one of the students’ questions, “How do you know you are reading too much or too little?” (Week 4, PPT slides), she used the life experience of cooking rice as an example of reaching the saturation point when there are no more new ideas: “Just as cooking rice, you can cook forever. But at certain point, you know no matter how much longer you cook, it is just going to be like that; and it tastes the best. We call that saturation point” (Class Observation, Week 4). Because rice is a staple food in China, students are familiar with how rice cookers work. This metaphor helps them understand the concept of saturation in the process of searching for research literature.

Drawing on students’ cultural knowledge can help them develop their writer identities. Research has shown that genres that involve elements of creative writing, such as literacy autoethnography, can have greater affordances in supporting the development of students’ writer identity (Lillis, 2001). In contrast, argumentative genres, such as literature reviews, can hardly support identity development because they leave relatively little space for students to bring their own cultural knowledge and life experiences into their writing (Lee, 2017). However, in this study, even though the students’ texts did not contain many explicit traces of their cultural identities, the instructor connected the process of learning to writing to the students’ cultural identities.

Students: Building Relationships Through Peer Feedback

The instructor assigned students the additional role of offering peer feedback. Regardless of the quality of the comments, these sessions provided essential opportunities for students to build a community and check their progress, ensuring that they felt connected rather than isolated in their struggles.

The students in the class had the main division of labor of learning the writing practices and completing their theses. Additionally, the instructor assigned them one more division of labor, offering peer feedback. During each class session, after delivering the mini-lecture, the instructor arranged the students into pairs, requesting them to offer peer feedback. Our class observations show that students engaged actively in this process. During the interviews, the students commented that the peer feedback sessions helped them connect to other students and understand how well they progressed compared to their peers, as Yura shared, “I know my classmates better when we worked in pairs to offer feedback. I also know I needed to catch up when my classmates shared their long drafts” (Second Interview). Thus, peer feedback sessions served not only to improve the quality of students’ writing but also to foster peer relationships and deepen students’ awareness of their developmental progress.

While research, such as that of Mochizuki and Starfield (2020), has revealed a positive effect of peer feedback on students’ writing, other studies have reported that students do not value peer feedback because they believe that their peers cannot offer valuable comments (Li, 2007). Regardless of quality, peer feedback

sessions seemed to positively mediate learning in this study as they became opportunities to build relationships and check progress.

DISCUSSION

This study examined a thesis writing class for EAL master's students through the lens of cultural–historical activity theory (CHAT), treating the classroom as an activity system. The findings show how an instructor's pedagogical choices coordinate these elements so that thesis writing is transformed from an individual cognitive task into a collective, identity-enriching endeavor. This collective approach shifted learning to write a thesis from an individual struggle to collective success.

First, the instructor's practice of acknowledging the students' home language and culture and using them to help students understand writing conventions positions multilingualism as a pedagogical and identity resource rather than a deficit (Massawe & Peterson, 2026). Using home languages can help students generate and deliver information more easily than English can (Gau, 2016). Using students' home languages can also contribute to an inclusive and positive climate (Dooley & Vallejo, n.d.). By legitimizing L1 as a mediating tool, the instructor encouraged students to treat their linguistic resources as assets within an English-medium system rather than as obstacles to overcome. Therefore, instructors need to be flexible in accommodating students' language preferences while ensuring the quality of students' English writing.

Additionally, the instructor's practice of providing writing samples and recommending journal articles helps students see written texts as more than content development. Research has shown that modeling exemplary writing, "text modeling" or "text mentorship," can be a useful way to familiarize student writers with the conventions of specific genres (Li, 2007; Li et al., 2020; Wette, 2014). Exemplary texts, such as journal articles, can help students understand writing practices by reducing "complex cognitive demands to a more manageable level" (Wette, 2014, p. 62). Text modeling may be particularly applicable for international students who may have content knowledge but lack adequate knowledge about discursive features and rhetorical moves (Li et al., 2020). For instance, Li (2007) reports that a Chinese doctoral student aiming at international publication followed the journal articles to realize rhetorical moves in their own writing. To date, however, text modeling has focused mainly on journal articles. Our study shows that peer-authored sample student papers prove especially useful for conveying institutional, course-specific expectations that journal articles do not capture.

The instructor's reiteration of academic integrity helped to raise students' awareness of avoiding plagiarism. Extensive research has reported that the writing practices of international students, especially those from Asian countries, often lack awareness of avoiding plagiarism when they engage in source-based writing because of different expectations and understandings of plagiarism (Harwood & Petrić, 2012; Lombardi, 2021). Sometimes their English proficiency makes it difficult for them to write in their own words. As a result, they choose to copy the

original texts. Our study serves as a counterargument: By treating academic integrity as a navigable rule within an activity system, the instructor reframed avoiding plagiarism as a learnable, strategic practice. Her practice might inspire other instructors to prevent plagiarism, especially when easily accessible large language models can produce texts with proper prompts.

The typical teacher and student division of labor was enriched by peer feedback. Although scholars have reported that international students tend to regard course instructors as the sole experts, this study reveals that international students enjoyed peer feedback sessions, regarding them as an opportunity to know their peers and compare progress. Thus, peer feedback not only supplements the instructor's ability to learn different expectations for and practices of academic writing but also facilitates social interaction. Research increasingly recognizes the benefits of peer support. For instance, Ntirenganya et al. (2026) reported that peer support in academic seminars in China facilitated academic socialization by helping students refine research topics, strengthen scholarly writing, and develop a sense of belonging. Similarly, Gilbert et al.'s (2026) study reported that peer community is among the most important factors for international students in the UK in navigating academic challenges. In this study, assigned peer feedback was an essential component of a support network that helped students learn writing and maintain emotional well-being.

This study contributes to research on writing studies by extending the application of CHAT from the individual learner to the collective classroom unit. While previous research by Ren and Zhu (2023) and Kessler (2020) demonstrated how activity system illuminates individual student strategies, this study demonstrates that the classroom itself functions as an activity system where the instructor's pedagogical design actively manipulates the nodes of tools, rules, and division of labor to scaffold learning. Taking the writing class as an activity system helps tease out the elements of the instructor's writing instruction and reveal the social elements of learning. Learning is not cognitive development but situated interactions that take place in a supportive writing context created jointly by the subjects. This mediated interaction makes an individually owned capstone work, such as a thesis, a social text.

Although this study focused on EAL master's students in a TESOL thesis-writing class, the findings provide directions for instructors working with international students in writing-intensive courses. Instructors can adopt a flexible language policy that permits home-language use while maintaining English standards for the final product, treating multilingualism as a resource rather than a problem (Massawe & Peterson, 2026). They can also curate genre models, including student-authored sample papers and journal articles, to make tacit disciplinary conventions visible and transfer the "cultural capital" that international students often lack (Gilbert et al., 2026). Additionally, reframing academic integrity as a system rule rather than a moral verdict can transform avoiding plagiarism into learnable practices as students navigate generative AI tools that produce fluent text on demand. Finally, structuring peer feedback to serve a dual purpose, with peer roles that build both academic skill and social connection, can simultaneously improve writing and foster belonging.

CONCLUSION

When the writing class is viewed as an activity system, although students are the subject of the system who need to achieve the object of completing a master's thesis, the instructor's pedagogical design can determine how tools, rules, and division of labor are involved in the writing process. Her recommendation of technological tools, her use of shared home language and cultural knowledge, her reiteration of the importance of academic integrity, and her assignment of students as peer reviewers are examples of how tools, rules, and division of labor mediated students' writing practices.

While this study provides an in-depth look at the sociocultural dynamics of a thesis writing course, it still has several limitations. First, the participants consisted exclusively of L2 female international students from China in one program. This homogenous demographic pool indicates that the findings may not be generalizable to writing classes consisting of students from different cultural backgrounds, genders, or disciplines. Additionally, the study focused specifically on a literature review as the capstone project; therefore, the tensions and mediating tools identified might differ from those found in programs requiring empirical research or creative theses. Finally, the presence of the researcher during class observations, despite efforts to remain unobtrusive, may have subtly influenced the participants' interactions and the instructor's pedagogical delivery.

Future research can expand the application of CHAT by investigating more diverse student populations. Researchers could examine how activity systems function for international students from varied linguistic and geographic backgrounds to determine whether shared home language remains a primary mediating tool. It would also be valuable to conduct longitudinal studies that follow these students in their professional careers or doctoral programs to determine whether the collaborative social text approach to writing has a lasting effect on their authorial identity. Finally, comparative studies across disciplines (e.g., STEM vs. humanities) and institutions may reveal how varying disciplinary conventions and institutional rules may influence the way international students navigate writing a capstone work.

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x ☒ **None**

☐ Some sections, with minimal or no editing

☐ Some sections, with extensive editing

☐ Entire work, with minimal or no editing

☐ Entire work, with extensive editing

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