

A Theoretical Framework for  
Exploring Second Language Writers' Beliefs in First Year Composition

by

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## ABSTRACT

Situated in the influx of Chinese students entering U.S. higher education and the L2 writing research growing interests in investigating learners' experience to gain further insights into their emic perspectives on English literacy development, this dissertation argues that the identifying the beliefs as the underlying principle shaping and being shaped by our experience. In this dissertation, I propose a theoretical framework of beliefs and validates the framework by using it to examine multilingual writers' learning experience in the context of First Year Composition. The framework advances a definition of beliefs and a framework demonstrating the relationship among three constructs—perception, attitude, and behavior. In order to develop the framework, I first synthesized existing literature on language learning beliefs and argue the scarcity of L2 writing researchers' discussing belief when exploring learners' experience. I define beliefs as *an individual's generalizations from the mental construction of the experience, based on evaluation and judgment, thus are predisposed to actions*. I proposed a framework of belief, consisting three mental constructs—perception, attitude and action—to identify and examine factors contributing the formation and change of beliefs. I drew on drawing on Dewey's theory of experience and Rokeach's (1968) belief theory, and contextual approach to beliefs in the field of second language acquisition. I analyzed the interview data of twenty-two Chinese students accounting their English learning experiences across four different contexts, including English class in China, TOEFL training courses, intensive English program, and FYC classroom. The findings show that their beliefs were formed and transformed in the contexts before FYC. They perceived all the writing learning in those courses as similar content and curriculum, but

the attitudes vary regarding the immediate contexts and long-term goal of using the knowledge. They believe grammar and vocabulary is the “king’s way,” the most effective and economic approach, which was emphasized in the test-oriented culture. Moreover, the repetitive course content and various pedagogies, including multiple revisions and the requirement of visiting writing center, have been perceived as requiring demonstration more efforts, which in turn prompted them to develop their own negotiation strategies, the actions, to gain more credits for the class. This dissertation concludes that the beliefs can be inferred from these all three constructs, but to change beliefs of learners, we need to make them explicit and incorporate them into writing instruction or curriculum design. Implications on how to further the research of beliefs as well as translating these findings into classroom pedagogies are also discussed. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of how the framework can be used to inform future research and classroom practices informed by writing beliefs identified in this study.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Beliefs and Experience Revisited**

Beliefs are our generalization of the existence of things, conviction of the truth about a statement, and confidence of taking actions. Our beliefs are acquired from the accumulation of either our own experience or other influential individuals' opinions, such as our family members, friends or community or formal education experience. In Dewey's philosophy, experience is a central concept attached to education since "teaching and learning are continuous processes of reconstruction of experience (Dewey, 1938, p. 111). He also regards beliefs as being used to "form or judge, justify or condemn. Our experiences are the exact reflection of the reality but our own mental construction of what we "ascribe value, impute meaning, assign importance" (Dewey, 1983, p. 83). In other words, our beliefs govern our experience, and are indicators of the decisions we make through our lives.

In the field of second language (L2) writing, there is a keen interest in exploring learners' experience through the terms such as perceptions of, expectations of and attitudes toward classroom context, writing tasks, various identities, etc. The purposes are to understand what resources they make use of, and the strategies they adopt to manage the demand of writing tasks and other perceived challenges. L2 writing scholars have placed great value in exploring academic literacy development from students' own perspectives, from the angles of perception, evaluation, expectation, as well as their strategies or behaviors. For example, some scholars elicited learners' subjective understanding or interpretation of the nature of writing, including the concepts of success

(Basturkmen & Lewis, 2002; Fishman & McCarthy, 2001), teacher's roles (Hansen, 2000), and the learning tasks or requirements (Leki, 2001). These studies showed the conflicting perceptions held by learners from the teacher and across contexts, which imposed additional difficulty on learning to write. Some other studies showed the relationship between learners' interpretation of the writing contexts and the need for or instruction (e.g. Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997; Silva, 1992; Zhou *et al.*, 2006), showing the persistent needs for language and rhetoric assistance across various contexts and time.

Still some other scholars attempted to show the connection between their perceptions, various attitudes and the actions or strategies (Casanave, 2002; Leki, 1995b; Morton *et al.*, 2015; Prior, 1991, 1998; Spack, 1997). The results showed that, learners' perceptions and orientation toward learning writing were shaped by further immersion of diverse academic discourse, leading to their use of different strategies or resources, namely the actions. The conclusions to be drawn from the studies are that, firstly, students hold pre-existing or persistent concepts about learning writing, which are "strongly held and well-developed ideas about writing and writing instruction to class with them" (Silva, 1992, p. 43).

These studies have gained insights into individual learners' academic literacy development from their own account of learning experience—how the worlds are perceived and what identities are at play in their negotiating ways into academic discourse communities. This thread of research demonstrates the emic perspectives held by learners, and data being cross-analyzed with surveys of classroom observation, writing samples analyses, or interviews with the instructors and faculty members. Different from the public documents recorded by the researchers, these *hidden transcripts* reveal "how

they reflected on what they did and how they did it, what they understood from their experiences, how they constructed what was happening to them in L2 writing, what they said among themselves” (Leki, 2001, p. 18).

### **Statement of Problem**

However, while some of the perceptions seem to be similar, the complexity and even conflicting contexts perceived by the learners would affect their attitudes and actions. The studies reviewed here have peripherally addressed different constructs related to beliefs, but not explicitly discussed to their impact on the learning performances and outcomes. A few studies to date have specifically addressed issues of beliefs in L2 writers’ learning experience. There is one special issue in 2012 *Journal of Second Language Writing* dedicated to the exploration of learners’ and instructors’ perception of textual appropriation and sources. Various perspectives related to beliefs are addressed respectively, such as motivation behind the behaviors of using direct quotation (Petric, 2012), students’ views on different ways of incorporating sources (Shi, 2012), and their understanding and strategies of writing from sources (Li & Casanave, 2012). Beliefs as the underlying mental state guiding surface opinions or performances are not explicitly or directly discussed. As Polio (2012) points out,

Perceptions and judgments on plagiarism or acceptable use of source texts are contingent on one’s interpretations and experiences in reading and writing academic texts in a specific disciplinary context. The lack of consensus on what is acceptable textual appropriation in student writing has led to the scholarship on perceptions of textual appropriation in second language writing. (p. 95)

There is one study, Ruiz’s (2009) study, she found that teacher’s instruction would affect the change of learners’ beliefs about self-efficacy, the nature of writing and the roles of their teachers. As she reminds that this “...the study of beliefs in second language us, a

neglected area of inquiry despite the importance attached to ‘language use’ in current pedagogical practices in instructed language contexts, and despite the crucial role that beliefs are thought to play in shaping the L2 learners’ engagement in language learning actions” (p. 263). Regarding this, in his recent account of L2 writing scholarship Hedgcock (2003) argues that “the field unquestionably needs extensive, in-depth research on writers, their strategies, their processes, their perceptions of discourse communities, and the influences of writing instruction” (p. 602).

Regarding the institutional practice, in response to the needs of multilingual learners, CCCC Statement not only call attention to identify and place the them appropriately institutionally, but also point out the importance of being aware and gaining the knowledge of their unique beliefs:

Second language writers often come from contexts in which writing is shaped by linguistic and cultural features different from their NES peers. Beliefs related to individuality versus collectivity, ownership of text and ideas, student versus teacher roles, revision, structure, the meaning of different rhetorical moves, writer and reader responsibility, and the roles of research and inquiry all impact how student writers shape their texts.

With the concern of learners’ beliefs in mind, however, we have not had enough research on exploring learners’ beliefs and how they influence their writing progress.

The dismissal of viewing beliefs as underlying construct influencing their perception and experience about the writing by researchers would limit our further endeavor of improving learner experience and the facilitate improvement. The next logical action is to identify the type or the nature of the constructs, and how they operate in learning writing as well as the outcome. Only by making these explicit and clear, we can mitigate the mismatched agendas between teachers and students to facilitate learning.

We need a framework for analyzing various concepts so as to understand the relationship between beliefs, experiences and behaviors.

### **Overview of Chapters**

This chapter has laid out the broader context in which this project is situated. This dissertation is organized into following five chapters. Chapter 2 offers a review of the literature, specifically in L2 writing on learner experiences, SLA research on belief, and theories for constructing a more robust framework of belief—perception, attitude and behaviors. Chapter 3 details the context, participants and the data collection and analyses to speak to the issues raised about writing beliefs in FYC classrooms. Chapter 4 presents findings of the multilingual writers' past learning experience of English learning, test preparation and motivation of studying abroad, showing the formation and transformation of beliefs. Chapter 5 discusses the two beliefs identified from the L2 writers' interpretation of FYC classroom learning and teaching, which are on composition learning and language development. In Chapter 6, I evaluate the usefulness of the theoretical proposed in this study to explore L2 writers' perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. I then present different ways this framework can be used to inform other research on learners' experiences and beliefs as well as L2 writing pedagogies. I conclude this dissertation with the study limitations and implication for future research.



## CHAPTER 2

### RESEARCHING LEARNER BELIEFS OF WRITING

In this dissertation, I look at beliefs in terms of personal generalization about the existence and relationship between oneself and the world, which influence our attitudes toward certain objects and our behaviors in specific contexts. Beliefs need to be inferred from various perspectives manifested in individuals' accounts—the belief statement, intentionality for the predisposed manner, and behavior related to the belief with uncertainty. In this chapter, I firstly examine the definitions of the constructs related to beliefs and their relationships, including experience, perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. I then use these definitions to discuss the research on beliefs in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and second language writing (L2W). Each review concludes an explanation of why an articulation of a definition of belief is necessary. I argue that, while the relationship between experience, beliefs and actions are explored, how these components are inter-related and influential to the learning process and outcome are not fully addressed. I then articulate definitions of mental constructs of beliefs, experience, perceptions, attitudes and behaviors. I also explain how they interact with each other to become integral part of our experience, shaping and being shaped by our beliefs. At the end, I provide my operational definitions and examples of these constructs within the theoretical framework of belief for exploring learning experience.

#### **Existing Conceptualization and Theories of Beliefs**

Researchers in the fields of philosophy, psychology and education have attempted to examine beliefs using various terms such as mental representation, conceptions, opinions, perspectives, perceptions, personal theories, action strategies, etc. They are all

beliefs in disguise, making beliefs an elusive concept to define (Pajares, 1992).

Definitions are basically conventions, general agreements among researchers that a particular term will present a specific concept. A community engaged in the research of common areas with common themes, however, has a responsibility to communicate ideas and results clearly as possible using common terms. For these reasons, it is important to use the terms consistently, accurately, and appropriately once their definitions have been agreed on. The following section provides the discussions of the nature, constructs and their relationship to the formation and the development of beliefs.

### **Nature and Constructs of Beliefs**

Beliefs are the generalization about the existence of the reality and the relationship between people, objects and events. This generalization, inferred from our limited examples or knowledge. They are “mental constructions of experience--often condensed and integrated into schemata or concepts" (Sigel, 1985, p. 351), and serve as a principle people hold to manipulate knowledge for a particular purpose under a necessary situation (Abelson, 1979). Beliefs are also considered as “individual subjective understandings, idiosyncratic truths, which are often value related and characterized by a commitment not present in knowledge” (Alexander & Dochy, 1995). Beliefs, according to Rokeach (1968), consist of three components--cognitive, affective and behavioral ones:

A *cognitive* component, because it represents a person’s knowledge, held with varying degrees of certitude, about what is true or false, good or bad, desirable or undesirable; an *affective* component, because under suitable conditions the belief is capable of arousing affect of varying intensity centering around the object of

the belief, around other objects (individual or groups) taking a positive or negative position with respect to the object of belief, or around the belief itself, when its validity is seriously questioned, as in an argument; and a *behavioral* component, because the belief, being a response predisposition of varying threshold, must lead to some action when it is suitably activated. The kind of action it leads to is dictated strictly by the content of the belief (pp. 113-114). Beliefs are closely related to personal goals, intentions, or decision-making processes, etc. based on the ideas to be verified later.

Generally accepted by theorists, beliefs are created or formed by enculturation and social construction. Cultural transmission has three components: enculturation, education and schooling (Van Fleet ,1979). Enculturation involves the incidental learning process individual observation, participation, and imitation, of all the cultural elements present in their personal world. Education is the directed and purposeful learning, either formal or informal, that has its main task bringing behavior in line with cultural requirements. Schooling is the specific process of teaching, and learning that take place outside the home. Knowledge is “factual, objective information, acquired through formal learning” (Alexander & Dochy, 1995), or “representative of the body of knowledge that constitutes a particular discipline of study” (Wenden, 1987 p. 517). It is also referred as cognitive and metacognitive knowledge, the *know what* and *know how*, declarative or procedural knowledge (Anderson, 1983, 1985 cited in Pajares, 1992, p. 192). Regarding this definition, knowledge or metacognitive knowledge should be considered as subset constructs under beliefs.

In addition to knowledge, perceptions also contribute to the formation of beliefs. Perceptions refer to the process of organizing, identifying, and interpreting sensory information in order to understand or represent the environment (Schacter, 2011). The certain state we experience is the “*acquiring*” of beliefs--If the “small perception” persists across time, it would be internalized and become part of the beliefs (Armstrong, 1968). The time or context-specific beliefs, then, should be seen as perceptions. From this view, perceptions or “perceptual experiences are not just essentially, but *intrinsically*, belief-inducing...which can only be specified in relation to belief” (Smith, 2001, p. 291). Moreover, perceptions and beliefs are not always aligned. As Bermudez (1995) noted, “in the normal course of things, perceivers tend to believe that the world is the way they perceive it to be. Perceptions are our daily encounters contributing to the formation and the justification of beliefs.

Beliefs consist of knowledge but are developed to be of stronger affective and evaluative traits (Nespor 1987). They are propositions that are held to be true and are "accepted as guides for assessing the future, are cited in support of decisions, or are referred to in passing judgment on the behavior of others" (Goodenough, 1963, p. 151, cited in Richard, 1996, p. 103). Attitudes can be seen as expressions of favor or disfavor toward a person, place, thing, or event derived from experiences. Allport (1967) defined attitude as "a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situation with which it is related" (p.8) (cited in Richardson, 1996, pp. 102-103). Moreover, attitudes are the sum of selective set of interrelated beliefs supporting or guiding our actions. As Rokeach (1968) explained, attitudes are "relatively enduring organization of

beliefs around and object or situation predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner" (p. 112). He further explained that "how a person will behave with respect to an object-within-a-specific-situation will therefore depend, on the one hand, on the particular beliefs or predispositions activated by the attitude object and, on the other hand, on the particular beliefs or predispositions activated by the situation (p. 126). Behaviors are the results of the interaction between "attitude" and the "definition of the situation." In this regard, beliefs are dispositions to action and major determinants of behavior, although the dispositions are time and context specific (Brown & Cooney, 1982). Nespor (1987) argued that individuals use strategic thought to select the cognitive tools with which to solve a problem, and this is where beliefs play the important role of determining the tasks to be performed or defining the problem. This explains the relationship between attitude and behavior—our attitude toward an object would not occur in vacuum, but need to be activated by the object and the situation.

In short, knowledge and perceptions are the two ends of the resources, objective and subjective in nature, feeding into one's mental system, a repertoire of various beliefs. The attitudes are the action plans based on one's own evaluation or judgment, to achieve intended purposes or goals. Beliefs are subjective mental state, conceptualizing what exists within one's experience; experience, on the other hand, is the belief-guided process of interpreting the contexts, objects and people involved to take actions corresponding to their beliefs.

### **Self-fulfilling Effect between Beliefs and Experience**

Beliefs filter not only what individuals recall but how they recall it, if necessary,

completely distorting the event recalled in order to sustain the belief. As Nisbett and Ross (1980) suggested, people are all theorists creating their own inferences they make about themselves, the surroundings and the circumstances. People grow comfortable with their beliefs, and these beliefs become their “self,” so that individuals come to be identified and understood by the very nature of the beliefs, the habits, they own. The raw materials or early experience would bias our interpretation, or perception, of subsequent or even contradictory information. As Pajares (1992) elaborates,

Once beliefs are formed, individuals have a tendency to build causal explanations surrounding the aspects of those beliefs, whether these explanations are accurate or mere invention. There is also the self-fulfilling prophecy—beliefs influence perceptions that influence behaviors that are consistent with, and that reinforce, the original beliefs (p. 317).

The results are the perseverance phenomena of belief maintenance. Early experiences strongly influence final judgements, which become beliefs highly resistant to change. As individuals incorporate others’ ideas as well as their own belief-colored perceptions, beliefs are created and fostered and generally endure, unaltered, unless they are deliberately challenged (Pajares, 1992, p. 316).

In Dewey’s theory, however, beliefs can be changed through the increase or receiving educational experience. In framing the concept of education under the theory of experience, Dewey (1983) presents two significant principles: continuity and interaction. Continuity principle states that all past and present experiences are carried forward and would influence future experiences and decisions (p. 35), and interaction refers to the objective and internal condition of an experience (p. 42). A normal experience involves the interaction between both the objective and the learner’s internal conditions, but experience is truly experience only when individuals’ subjective mind surpasses the

objective condition (i.e., what educators do and how they do it). This experience can be seen as a transaction between the individual's internal personal needs, desires, capacities, and purposes and the environment (p. 45). Experience involves both external exposure to new interaction, but the internal state of mind decides what experiences being valued as educationally worthwhile. Beliefs, as Dewey points out, are used to "form or judge, justify or condemn. To believe is to ascribe value, impute meaning, assign importance" (1983, p. 83). Beliefs, for Dewey (1933) are "something beyond itself by which its value is tested; it makes an assertion about some matter of fact or some principle or law" (p. 6). Belief is crucial for "it covers all the matters of which we have no sure knowledge and yet which we are sufficiently confident of to act upon and also the matters that we now accept as certainly true, as knowledge, but which nevertheless may be questioned in the future" (p. 6). Experience is the backdrop for individuals thinking and actions, and "[t]eaching and learning are continuous process of reconstruction of experience (Dewey, 1938, p. 111)."

In sum, the discussion in this section offers clearer explanations for the nature and the formation of beliefs from experience, as well as their relationships between different constructs, perception, attitudes and behaviors. The next section focuses on the approaches, contributions and limitations of the approaches adopted in the field of second language learning in exploring beliefs.

### **SLA Approaches: Connecting Beliefs and Actions**

Since mid 1980s, researchers in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have started the interest in exploring beliefs, one of the attributes of individual differences, such as motivation, aptitude, personality, attributes, etc. which influence their learning process

and achievement. Broadly defined as assumptions or personal theories, beliefs are referred to as the representation of students’ understanding of the nature of language, the process of learning, interpretation of teachers’ intention, and evaluation of the demand of learning tasks.

Defining beliefs in SLA has been a tricky mission as well, but two dominant factors can be observed from various terms adopted by the researchers. Barcelos (2003) provided some examples of various definitions of beliefs (Table 1), and concluded that there are two shared features. The first feature is the focus on the nature of language and language learning. The second feature is that, in addition to cognitive aspect, beliefs have the social and cultural roots (Barcelos, 1995; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Gardner, 1988). Riley (1989) argues that some beliefs are cultural-specific in relation to language and language learning. Miller and Ginsberg (1995) indicated that language learning beliefs learners held could help them frame and interpret experiences. The proliferation of various terms, as Freeman (1991) reminds, are “the issue is not the pluralism of labels, but the recognition of the phenomenon itself” (p. 32). The significance of investigating learners’ beliefs lies in demonstrating what they know instead of what they need to know.

Table 1. *Different terms and definitions for beliefs about SLA*

<b>Terms</b>	<b>Definitions</b>
Folklinguistic theories of learning of learning (Miller & Ginsberg, 1995)	“Ideas that students have about language and learning” (p. 294).
Learner representations (Holec, 1987)	“Learners’ entering assumptions about their roles and functions of teachers and teaching materials” (p. 152)
Representations (Riley, 1989, 1994)	“Popular ideas about the nature of language and languages, language structure and language use, the relationship between thought and language, identity and



	language, identity and language, language and intelligence, language and learning, and so on. (1994, p. 8)”
Learners’ philosophy of language learning (Abraham & Vann, 1987)	“Beliefs about how language operates, and, consequently, how it is learned” (p. 95).
Metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1986a)	“The stable, storable although sometimes incorrect knowledge that learners have acquired about language, learning and the language learning process; also referred to as knowledge or concepts about language learning or learner beliefs; there are three kinds: person, task, and strategic knowledge” (p. 163).
Beliefs (Wenden, 1986)	“Opinions which are based on experience and the opinions of respected others, which influence the way they [students] act” (p. 5).
Cultural beliefs (Gardner, 1988)	“Expectations in the minds of teachers, parents and students concerning the entire second language acquisition task” (p. 110).
Learning culture (Riley, 1997)	“A set of representations, beliefs and values related to learning that directly influence [students’] learning behaviors” (p. 122).
Culture of learning languages (Barcelos, 1995)	“Learners’ intuitive implicit (or explicit) knowledge made of beliefs, myths, cultural assumptions and ideas about how to learn languages. This knowledge, according to learners’ age and social economic level, is based upon their previous educational experience, previous (and present) readings about language learning and contact with other people like family, friends, relatives, teachers and so forth” (p. 40).
Culture of learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996)	“The cultural aspects of teaching and learning; what people believe about ‘normal’ and ‘good’ learning activities and process, where such beliefs have a cultural origin” (p. 230).
Conceptions of learning and beliefs (Benson & Lor, 1999)	“Conceptions of learning are concerns with what the learning thinks the objects and processes of learning <i>are</i> ”; beliefs [...] are concerned with what the learner holds to be true about these objects and processes given a certain

conception of what they are.” “...conceptions of learning characterize learners’ thinking at a higher level of abstraction than beliefs” (p. 464).

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Based on different theoretical and methodological frameworks, different approaches have been identified and each approach poses different emphases on the relationship between beliefs and actions. Barcelos (2003) categorized the existing studies into three approaches, normative, metacognitive and contextual ones, based on the definitions, methodology, and the relationship between beliefs and actions.

In the normative approach, beliefs are viewed as different ideas about learning based on their experiences or the opinions of the influential others (e.g. teachers, family members, peers). These ideas, or *learner representations*, are their “entering assumptions about their roles and functions of teachers and teaching materials” (Holec, 1987, p. 152). While some of the preexisting beliefs are productive in facilitating learning outcome, some beliefs, which are not aligned with teachers’ agenda, would hinder students from engaging in classroom activities or accept suggestions (Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Ellis, 1996; Kern, 1995). For example, believing language learning consisting of mainly vocabulary memorization or grammar application, would impede learners’ acceptances of the pedagogies promoting holistic strategies associated with successful language learners (Horwitz, 1988). Other aspects related to beliefs were identified as learning strategies, motivation, attitudes, and autonomy and the learning outcome. To identify and document the nature and types and of beliefs, questionnaire or Likert-scale survey is the most commonly used method (e.g. Horwitz, 1985, 1987; Mantle-Bromley, 1995). However, the pre-existing questions or descriptions suffer the critique of the possibility of learners’

misinterpreting the choices offered by the researchers, and little room for learners' own expressions of their perspectives.

In metacognitive approach, researchers place more emphasis on “strategies” as the connection between beliefs and behaviors. Beliefs are viewed as knowledge about learning, or *metacognitive knowledge*, which is “specialized portion of a learner’s acquired knowledge base” (Flavell, 1979). Wenden (1987) defined metacognitive knowledge as “the stable, stable although sometimes incorrect knowledge that learners have acquired about language, learning and the language learning process” (p. 163). It is that part of long-term memory, *stable* body of knowledge, that contains what learners know about learning although sometimes incorrect; it is also *stable* as learners are capable of bringing this knowledge to consciousness and talking about it. In this approach, the connection between beliefs and autonomous behaviors received much more attention. The beliefs aligned with self-directed learning are viewed as leading to successful strategies, and negative beliefs would result in unsuccessful strategies or non-autonomous behaviors. The beliefs also have adaptive functions helping learners interpret tasks and their own roles when entering a new environment (e.g. McCargar, 1993; White, 1999), or how they act in the classrooms or react to the pedagogies (Wenden, 1986b). The examination of beliefs provides the contexts for understanding how and why students prioritize different learning goals, choose certain strategies, and assess their learning outcomes (e.g. Wenden, 1986a, 1987, 1998). The value of this approach is twofold—use of interview and revelation of learners’ self-oriented learning. The assumption behind this approach is that “students’ metacognitive knowledge is their theories of action” and the reflection of what they are doing and to develop potential learning opportunities. The

interviews give learners the opportunity to reflect their own experience, to define and evaluate the learning processes in their own terms. The critiques are, however, the inference of beliefs from students' own intentions and statements rather than from actions and the ignorance of contextual factors, which connect beliefs and experiences.

In the contextual approach, researchers attempted to highlight the role of specific situations in relation to the beliefs, rather than looking for the generalization of the beliefs. Beliefs here are viewed as socially constructed, dynamic and variable, which need to be explored in the immediate contexts of learning or teaching (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003). Context, understood as learners' constructions of their experiences, is crucial to this type of analysis. Within this definition of context, participants' perspectives and the ways they organize their perceptions of events are essential" (p. 20). What students perceived as the learning contexts, practices, and what they highlighted in their accounts (Morton *et. al.*, 2015) is crucial in understanding how and why certain beliefs emerge or dominate. The investigation usually involves methods that are grounded in students' own interpretative meanings and perspectives. The use of different methods, such as observations, interviews, life stories, are incorporated to gain more diverse information about the beliefs as embedded in students' contexts. For example, in White's (1999) study on learners' experience of self-directed instruction, she found that the context and learner influence each other reciprocally:

Self-instruction is not about learner characteristics or behavior perspective, nor is about a specific set of materials. Rather, it concerns the processes learners establish for themselves to engage with the target-language and to continue to develop target language skills" (p. 10).

Also, she points out how beliefs helped learners to adjust to the new environment as they revise and adapted their initial expectation and gained experiences in a new context.

The most recent trend of research has focused on how beliefs are appropriated and negotiated during interaction with others, especially their teachers (Barcelos, 2011). The relationship between beliefs and behaviors is not one-directional but reciprocal (Riley, 1997; Yang, 1992). Richard (1996) explains that, “beliefs are thought to drive actions; however, experiences and reflection on action may lead to changes in and/or additions to beliefs” (p. 104). The discussion with students about the formation and development of beliefs should be seen as a type of learning (Woods, 2003). When individuals act upon certain beliefs, the nature of uncertainty within beliefs imposes doubt on the existent thoughts, and then triggers the reflective thinking. This reflection process serves the opportunities of recognizing the obstacles and motivates individuals to search for solution, change, and possible growth.

SLA researchers have attempted to establish the connection between beliefs and behaviors, and found that beliefs can be changed if appropriate teaching pedagogies are adopted. However, the beliefs constructs, including perception and attitudes have not been explicitly addressed in the research. As Alanen (2003) argued that, from sociocultural perspectives, beliefs once turned into “mediational tools” would exert stronger influence on learners and their actions. As she explains,

“[T]he learners must be able to perceive that the tool has certain properties she can make use of in a particular learning activity. Such perceptions are not universal but culture- and context-specific. Learners cannot make use of a mediational means if they do not perceive the opportunities for actions such means give them (p. 63).

It has been recognized that it is crucial to view learners' own mental constructed experience as the specific context of exploring beliefs. I argue that we need to investigate into perceptions on the outset to see if learners have noticed the existence of certain people, objects or events first. Moreover, the attitudes learners hold toward the should be identified and discussed separately to explain the paradoxical and contradictory characteristics of beliefs (e.g. Miller & Ginsberg, 1995). For example, only with closer examination of how and why the discrepancy occurs between perception, attitudes, behaviors and beliefs can learners and teachers to break the chain of self-fulfilling effect.

The previous sections on philosophical discussions and review of SLA approaches on beliefs have lay the ground of understanding the significance of exploring students' experiences from the lens of belief. Next section I present my operational framework of belief system to investigate L2 writers' experience.

### **Framework of Beliefs: Operational Definitions and Constructs**

In this regard, there is a need for a framework to explore the concepts of beliefs and explain the relationship among different constructs—perceptions, attitudes and behaviors (Table 1). I define beliefs as *an individual's generalizations from the mental construction of the experience, based on evaluation and judgment, thus are predisposed to actions*. I draw on Rokeach's (1968) conceptualization of beliefs as having three constructs--a cognitive one representing knowledge, an affective one arousing emotions, and a behavioral one being activated when action is required (pp. 113-114). In this framework, belief is the overarching principle influencing our perceptions, i.e. the existence of certain things, people or occurrence of events. In this way, perception is

exactly the “context” SLA scholars of contextual approach striving to discover. As Breen (2001) reminded,

Student definitions of a task are framed within their definitions of the classroom context in which they are working. These definitions in turn encourage learners to interact on the basis of what they deduce as a context-appropriate pragmatics, which are likely to frame and select the *specific* meanings that attract the negotiative effort of learners. (p. 128)

The separation of perceptions from attitudes and behaviors provides more specific information on what context learners constructed in the first place. Within the similar contexts, students may have different attitudes and corresponding behaviors, which are theoretically under the influence of different beliefs.

Among all the perceptions, only those which are falling under the scope of our beliefs will be turned into attitudes. The attitudes could be positive or negative reactions toward the perceived objects after being evaluated against the belief. The actions, however, would be taken when there were specific obstacles need to solve or goals to achieve, in a way aligned with the attitudes. The following two examples show how to deconstruct two persons’ experience using the framework of belief.

Table 2. *Constructs of Belief Framework*

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Belief	The proposition statement, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says, preceded by explicit “I believe that”, or general statement about the connection between two subjects.	“Writing is all about learning grammar.”
Perception	It refers to learners’ knowledge about the sensory input (subject, objects, events, and people) after analyzing, interpreting and	“My English teacher focused on grammar and vocabulary memorization.”

organizing the information, when being required to recall and express at some point of time or situation.

Attitude	It refers to learners' positive or negative evaluation of certain events, objects, or people (e.g. themselves and others), in relation to their goals or expectation about the learning outcomes.	"I think grammar is the most important knowledge in writing."
Behavior	This refers to the statements including specific challenges, and the problem-solving process, including the resources, strategies being used already or in the future, and/or the account of when, how and/or why for taking the actions. Not taking actions is counted as a type of behaviors, which are referred as resistance, or the state of searching for assistance.	"I always make many grammatical errors so I always ask the tutor at the writing center to correct them for me."

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The relationship between these four constructs can be understood in the diagram below (Figure 1). Belief operates as the furthest outer circle guiding the three other constructs, and each takes up smaller/narrower portion or core location of the overall scope of our thinking, showing how each construct represents more specific objects or situations.

### **Significance of each construct on revealing students' learning process**

Perception serves the information of what attracts students' attention or notice of the learning environment and resources available. Attitudes refer to how they evaluate certain objects, which are favored or disfavored by different students, and serves as an indicator for what students tend to have stronger reaction and the situation arousing their actions or reactions and why. Behavior are the strategies or resources students have taken to solve the problems they encounter so as to achieve the expected outcomes. In short,



PAB belief system provides the dissected pictures of the students' learning experience-- perception is the "what," attitude is the "why" and behavior is the "how" component.

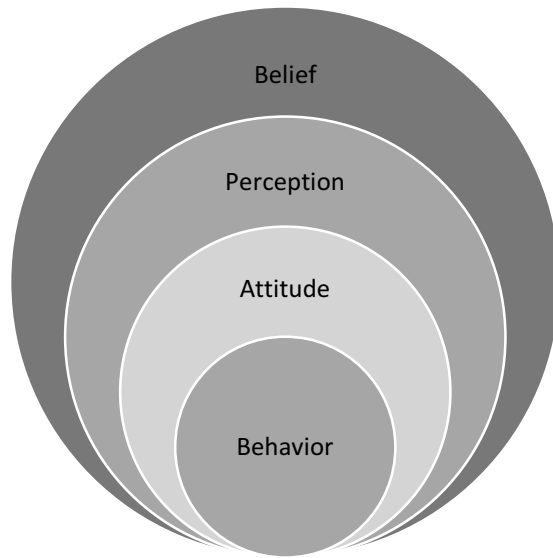


Figure 1. *Interrelationship between belief constructs.*

Let us take a look at two possible scenarios and beliefs in operation—one in a more general situation and the other in a learning context. In recounting her experience going to a restaurant, a woman whose belief is smoking causing one's health problem, she would bring up noticing someone smoking or the population of smokers in the restaurant when talking about the issues of environmental health and safety. This is her perception of what matters more than other possible occurrence, smoking in this case. The restaurants, which allow smoking would be evaluated negatively by her; she has developed an attitude toward that place. When deciding which restaurant to eat at, she would choose and go to the restaurant she knows with strict non-smoking policy—this is her action.

Take another context, language learning classroom, for example. A student who strongly believes in learning a language, grammar knowledge is the far most important

way to master the language. When recalling his classroom experience, he would point out whether or not the teacher addresses grammar issues in class or provides feedback on his grammatical mistakes, which is perception. He may further comment on the clarity or helpfulness teacher's instruction on grammar on his language progress, which is attitude. Lastly, his account of how he asked for further grammar explanations from the teacher after class would be his action.

The importance of identifying these constructs is that, while some people can explicitly state what they believe in, some of them might just judge or act upon certain things driven by the beliefs without being aware of them. In this case, beliefs can only be identified by analyzing perceptions, attitudes and behaviors.

### **L2 Writers' Learning Experience**

Based on the framework I proposed, I am now reviewing some L2 writing studies focusing on learners' literacy development, with varying focuses on the belief constructs. L2 writing scholars valued the learners' own account of their literacy and highlighted the significance of exploring their own account of experience, stories of success and failure. The studies reviewed in this section peripherally investigated learners' experiences from the perspectives of perceptions, attitudes and behaviors. As argued earlier, the lack of the clear and consistent use of terms related to beliefs has made it difficult to synthesize the findings in a coherent way. The goal here is to show the richness and complexity of academic literacy development by exploring learners' own interpretation of the nature and the process of learning writing, but findings were limited by the lack of framework to explore the experience coherently.

Perceptions in L2 writing studies have been discussed from their knowledge of the language, writing process or tasks, which mismatched the pedagogical orientation of the courses or teacher's intention. For example, Silva (1992) investigated students' perceptions of the differences between L1 and L2 writing, and process, rhetoric, and language concerns are the three dominant aspects. He also noticed that, while the students had taken writing courses, which were process-oriented, they still tended to focus more on textual or product matters, which indicates that "a discipline's theoretical mood swings may not necessarily reflect or coincide with the priorities of the individual it serves" (p. 44). Prior (1998) explored ESL doctoral students' interpretation of the writing tasks and professors, negotiation of the conflicting academic goals and personal expectations, which were mismatched with their professor's perceptions. In Hocking and Toh's (2010) study, they found that ESL students have conceptualized academic writing as linguistically complex and socially constituted practice, including the aspects of audience, complexity of L2 academic writing, content and the assessment. Their conceptions were different from the orientation of the EAP writing courses, which adopted the approaches of rule-focused and skills-based instruction, which may "invoke different, and perhaps problematic, conceptualizations of writing practice in the minds of these students" (p. 172).

Some other researchers explored learners' experiences from eliciting their evaluation or expectation toward certain writing tasks, instructions, or their own identities, which falls under the attitude category of my framework. Leki and Carson (1994) surveyed the students for the skills perceived to be the most helpful in dealing with the writing demand of other content courses. The results showed that most of them

were satisfied with the instruction taught in EAP courses, such as task management strategies, rhetorical skills, language proficiency, and mechanics, etc. They also pointed out that, the persistent, continuing need for expanding vocabulary became a salient issue, which can be attributed to three concerns--(1) more efficient in retrieving the “appropriate lexical and grammatical forms,” (2) more precise match between the expression and their thinking, and (3) the gap between the writing required in L2 classrooms and the other courses. Zhou *et. al.* (2006) analyzed L2 learners’ writing experiences across years at an ESL program and their disciplinary courses. They found that students’ goals for improving writing were rather persistently on language, rhetoric, and ideas and knowledge. This demonstrates that their conceptualization of learning shaped by the resources, people, interactions, models, and rules available in their immediate social context. Zamel’s (1995) elicited how students wanted faculty to know about their experiences and needs and faculty’s perceptions about ESL learners. The results showed that, their views about the desired teacher image include “patience, tolerance, and encouragement” being the key features of the teachers; the assistance in writing including “more explicitly detailed assignment and more accessible classroom talk” (p. 511). They also expressed their concern over the professors’ misinterpreting and underestimating their effort or academic performance because of their struggles with language or the limited engagement in class activities. The students thus hoped to receive credits and acknowledgment from their faculty for their achievement through working harder than the native English-speaking counterparts. These findings demonstrated some difficulties because of their own persistent individual concerns or their encountering of new contexts, which posed additional needs or supports from the teachers.

The behaviors investigated by L2 writing researchers include the strategies, interaction, communication or negotiation taken by the learners, which were influenced by the factors such as identities, agency and prompted by the conflicting perceptions. Leki (1995) attempted to understand the process of five ESL learners acquiring academic literacy by exploring the coping strategies they brought and developed in response to new situations. She identified ten different strategies, revealing that these students “constantly showed themselves to be resourceful, attentive to their environment, and creative and flexible in their response to new demands” (p. 253). In Leki’s study (2000), she discussed both the perception as well as the strategies learners adopted in the writing course. She found individual L2 student’s perceptions of writing classes as just “hoops to jump through” for he believed that teacher’s assigning work and requirements “indecipherable and entirely arbitrary” (p. 25). She concluded that, the student’s decision on doing the minimum to get by is a manifestation of learners’ projecting a settled and rational self to reach for success however unsure the institutional or individual sense of identity might be.

Leki’s (2007) longitudinal study featured four students’ undergraduate literacy experience from ESL or first year composition to general education in American curriculum. She observed that, the individual learners’ traits, such as their personalities, learning styles, self-regulation, expectations, and sense of identities, intersected with the diverse contexts, which consequently constructing their individual experiences. Moreover, students worked to restructure the contexts to manage the socio-academic relationship they developed with peers and faculty. Casanave (1995) explored doctoral students’ writing in a sociology program and found that, within the restricted conditions

formed by the disciplinary practice and conventions, L2 writers were able to reconstruct the context for writing, drawing upon multiple and local resources such as their own linguistic and cognitive development, previous educational experiences, and cultural background. Spack (1997) traced one L2 student's experience both in ESL writing program and across other disciplinary courses in her undergraduate years. She observed that, the student's educational background shaped her approach to U.S. academic discourse practices and the way she theorized about those practices; her theory and analysis of her own experience also changed over time.

As we can see from these findings collectively, L2 writing researchers have found that with their own attributes (e.g. aptitude, personality, or identity), students have carried with them certain notions of and preferences for the approaches to learning. These traits are also interacting with the external influences such as their previous educational, social, and cultural backgrounds. When entering a new environment, students would perceive the interaction and the classroom context from their own lens, leading to various reactions and orientations toward learning strategically. The newly-acquired experience, filtered through students' own conceptualization of learning and interaction with other people, would shape the individual's orientation to learn or not. While these studies all peripherally addressed the issues of perceptions, attitudes and behaviors, belief as the underlying factor and its relationships among various constructs are not explicitly discussed. Learners' endeavors of adopting and adapting strategies are the manifestation of their construction of learning and negotiation of their previous beliefs about language learning, process or their own identities.

As discussed previously, beliefs are the key influencing learners' reading the contexts, arousing the attitudes and adopting preferred strategies for the challenges. While the L2 research has shown the divergent perceptions held by students and writing teachers, learners' own persistent attitudes toward certain skills or knowledge, and various behaviors, including reconstructing the contexts, what at the crux is the reason or the thinking driving them perceive, evaluate the efficacy or outcomes of their chosen behaviors. To maximize the productivity in the classrooms, it is important to help students develop a critical understanding of their own beliefs, and teachers' awareness of the relationship between beliefs and the learning. Only by making beliefs explicit and accessible to the learners, we can break the self-fulfilling chain effect of beliefs in relation to their performance and outcome.

### **Summary of the Chapter**

In this chapter, I introduced different concepts adopted in research on beliefs and compared their differences and relationships. I then reviewed the three SLA approaches to investigating L2 learners' beliefs, which are strongly related to their actions as well as outcomes. I further argued the significance of looking into learners' own interpretation of the contexts they are situated as the backdrop of how and why certain beliefs are activated. I then proposed a framework of beliefs, consisting three constructs—perception, attitudes and behaviors—as an approach to investigate experience and to identify the underlying beliefs guiding these mental constructs.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

The primary goal of this study was to develop and validate the theoretical framework for exploring L2 writers' beliefs. To this end, I examined the experience of the multilingual students in the context of First Year Composition, which was a project conducted in 2012 to 2013 with the primary goal of understanding the learning difficulty of Chinese students as a majority of incoming international students. This project was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the L2 writers' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors emerged in their account of past and current English learning experience?
2. How do L2 writers' construct the context, teacher and learning of writing in FYC classrooms?
3. What writing beliefs emerge from the L2 writers' own account of their learning experience in FYC classrooms?

The findings will demonstrate what kind of beliefs and how different factors and resources they draw upon from their past learning experience, how they interpret the present situation to construct their own world, which were related to their growth as a second language writer. A mixed method of qualitative study, including questionnaires and interviews, which provide both participants' collective information of their background as well as more extended accounts of their current learning process in First Year Composition classrooms.

This study focused on the partial data collected in a larger project investigating Chinese students' learning experience and their teachers in FYC classroom. The group



project was collaboratively conducted under the supervision of a professor specialized in L2 writing and four other doctoral students (three Mandarin Chinese speakers, and one native-English speaker) and myself as a Chinese Mandarin speaker as well during 2012-2013 school year. The following sections provide more detailed explanations of the contexts, participants recruitment, and interview for research data collection and analysis.

### **First Year Composition as a Contested Arena**

First Year Composition (FYC) is one of the arenas requiring immediate attention for two reasons—the influx of international students and context as the site of disciplinary wrestling between composition and language learning. The increasing population of multilingual students admitted into U.S. higher education has also created a rather changing context for learning and teaching. According to *Open Doors Policy* 2016 report, the presence of multilingual student population in the last decade, there was 85 percent of growth studying at U.S. higher education, and China remains the top sending country. Such a rapid increase and shift in population has led many faculty members across the university to become more concerned with understanding how to better meet the needs of these students. Early in 2006, Matsuda has cautioned that L2 writers' presence would actually constitute the majority of the student population in FYC, and suggests that,

To work effectively with the student population in the twenty-first century, all composition teachers need to reimagine the composition classroom as the multilingual space that it is, where the presence of language difference is the default. (p. 649)

This concern is even more acutely felt by FYC teachers who are now facing classes with larger Chinese as the majority, who brought with their own past experience, which are

more linguistic-oriented pedagogies than a rhetorical-oriented approach of the new learning environment. The consequences are not only the differences of physical presence of Chinese students but also their own individual mental construction of the learning contexts of composition learning.

Learner beliefs, as argued earlier, are formed by previous learning experiences, but also shaping and being shaped by new encounters. It is then depending on the contexts learners constructed, within which learners have had developed certain attitudes and corresponding behaviors toward certain challenges. FYC classroom as an arena comprising the objectives of teaching rhetoric and composition, as well as literacy and language development for multilingual learners serve as an ideal location for understanding the interplay of beliefs and learning writing. Much L2 writing research has been focusing on the contexts like English Language Program (ELP) or Intensive English Program (IEP) writing courses, which are language-focused. Studies have shown that FYC has been separate from other language programs in terms of administration, pedagogical approaches, and assumed nature of academic writing (e.g., Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995; Williams, 1995). Instead of focusing on developing students' linguistic proficiency, FYC programs are housed within English departments and emphasize building rhetorical knowledge. FYC also aims to introduce students to the norms of college level writing; however, the practice and the possibility of addressing disciplinary writing practice outside the actual professional contexts are still lingering concerns for composition, L2 writing and EAP researchers (e.g., Hyland, 2002; Johns, 1997; Spack, 1988). As Thaiss (2002) reasons that learners' experience is unpredictable and yet could be rich resource for writing teachers:

Every student's first-year writing experience is different, shaped by the courses, sections, and teachers encountered; every school's writing curriculum is different, shaped by policies, commitments, student population, course offerings, and a host of other criteria. Hence, the bad news is that it's impossible to predict with certainty and specificity what "academic writing will be" for all or any of the students. But the good news is that the students in your class can become your eyes and ears in seeking to understand WAC in their differing contexts.

The changes and the challenges confronting both L2 students and teachers alike are due to the complexity of different experiences formed in the past but also the new environment they need to get accustomed into. In other words, the students are immersed in various academic subject matter courses, and would also learn different discourse and writing conventions, which may not be fully addressed in their previous courses, or even receiving conflicting pedagogies or educational ideologies. These are all interrelated and will influence learners' educational experience and literacy development. The key then, is not to take the surface perceptions, but to pinpoint the underlying factors imping on their varied construction or interpretation.

### **Institutional Context of This Study**

This study was conducted in the FYC courses at Arizona State University, in which the writing programs offer two course tracks: mainstream and multilingual sessions, and multilingual students can choose either track. The data were collected from the students enrolled in three multilingual sessions, WAC 107, ENG 107, and 108. All multilingual freshmen students are required to take ENG 107 and 108, and the students with lower proficiency in the placement tests (e.g. TOEFL or IELTS tests) are required to take WAC 107, a stretched course in addition to the regular sessions. After completing WAC 107, they then can take ENG 107 and 108. ENG 107 and 108 are equivalent of the mainstream sessions, ENG 101 and 102, respectively.

WAC 107 is a stretch program with two-semester, six-credit-hour designed for students who have minimal training and experience with academic writing, to develop more effective writing. ENG 107 is the first-semester writing course, which aims to help students with developing and expressing ideas effectively, by engaging in various literacies. With a focus on expository and persuasive writing, students learn various rhetorical process and features to anticipate audience's response. The students are required to complete three formal writing projects, which at the end of semester are about 20 pages of the final drafts in total, and a final reflection. ENG 108, the second-semester course, aims to help students to develop reading and writing strategies that are "sophisticated, situation-sensitive." With a focus on argument writing, students will learn "evidence discovery, claim support, argument response, and their applications to academic debate, public decision making" (ASU First-Year Composition Courses, 2017). ENG 108 has the same requirement for the three writing projects as ENG 107.

### **Recruitment Procedure**

To recruit participants, the researchers first e-mailed all instructors teaching the three sections, asking for a 5-minute class visit permissions to recruit Chinese participants whoever were willing to participate in the study. The researchers who visited writing classes explained the purposes of the study in Chinese to increase students' comprehension and willingness to participate in the project. The participants were recruited through emails and researchers' visiting FYC classrooms (See Appendix B for Chinese and Appendix C for English versions of recruitment letters). The written invitation (Appendix D) distributed during classroom visit asked students who agreed to participate for their signatures and contact information. To encourage students'

participation, a financial incentive in the form of a \$10 gift card was offered.

### **Participants**

All the participants were enrolled in one of the multilingual sections under the FYC program in Fall 2012. Among 22 of the participants, 12 were females and 10 were males, and their age ranged from 19 to 23 years old. The year of their learning English they reported range from 9 to 14 years, and the length of their time studying at ASU ranged from a few months to two years (see Table 2 for the profile of the Chinese participants). Ten participants were enrolled in the basic writing course (WAC 107) and twelve participants were enrolled in the other two serial courses (ENG 107 & 108). The participants who did not go to IEP registered the basic writing course after they entered the university. The students with additional admission, if completed IEP courses at ASU successfully, were not required to provide proficiency test scores for admission to their chosen programs. As explained on the ASU IEP program website, “Conditional admission allows students to prepare for a successful transition into the university, with the support of faculty, staff and advisors (Intensive English Program, 2017).” Their proficiency was shown with different language tests—TOEFL, both iBT and PBT formats, IELTS, or the IEP program. Some participants have taken courses at IEP programs housed at ASU or elsewhere and then took language tests; their experiences will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Before arriving in the United States, these participants have learned English for ten years in average. Back in China, sixteen of them used an agency to apply for undergraduate school in the U.S. and seven of them did not use an agency for application. The services of agencies students used included decision which universities to apply,

Table 3. *Profile of the Chinese Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Eng. Learning</b>	<b>Course</b>	<b>Time in the U.S.</b>	<b>Proficiency<sup>1</sup></b>
Hillary	F	Business	10 yrs	WAC107	3 mths	TOEFL 75
Jillian	F	Undeclared	10 yrs	WAC107	9 mths	TOEFL p <sup>2</sup> 519
John	M	Biochemistry	10 yrs	WAC107	9 mths	TOEFL 60
Shaw	M	Biochemistry	9 yrs	WAC107	3 mths	TOEFL 68
Sansa	F	Mechanical Engineering	14 yrs	WAC107	9 mths	TOEFL 81
Zack	M	Finance	12 yrs	WAC107	9 mths	IELTS 6.5
Tina	F	Supply Chain	14 yrs	ENG107	9 mths	TOEFL 80
Jessica	F	Business	11 yrs	WAC107	1 yr & 3 mths	TOEFL 74
Tonya	F	Business	10 yrs	WAC107	9 mths	TOEFL p512
Shelby	F	Tourism Management	10 yrs	WAC107	2 yrs	TOEFL 74
Ken	M	Economics	12 yrs	WAC107	9 mths	TOEFL 68
Dixon	M	Computer Science	10 yrs	ENG107	9 mths	TOEFL 88
Jimmy	M	Business	10 yrs	ENG107	9 mths	IEP
Kate	F	Urban Planning	10 yrs	ENG108	1 yr	TOEFL 92
Sheldon	M	Business & Elementary Education	10 yrs	ENG108	1 yr & 7 mths	TOEFL 78
Warren	M	Business	10 yrs	ENG108	1 yr & 7 mths	TOEFL 70
Simon	M	Fine Arts and Design	12 yrs	ENG107	1 yr	TOEFL 64
Sarah	F	Biomedical Engineering	11 yrs	ENG108	1 yr & 4 mths	TOEFL 100
Ashley	F	Journalism & Mass Communication	13 yrs	ENG107	9 mths	TOEFL p500
Gabrial	F	Supply Chain Management & Cultural Geography	12 yrs	ENG108	1 yr	TOEFL 69

<sup>1</sup> \*Proficiency: This part shows participants English proficiency in terms of TOEFL iBT scores (lower case p noted after if refers to paper-based format), IELTS scores, or attendance in IEP program for conditional acceptance into the school. TOEFL

<sup>2</sup> P: paper-based TOEFL test with 677 as the full score.

Howard	M	Economics	7 yrs	ENG 108	1 year	TOEFL 84
June	F	Applied Math for Life and Social Science	11 yrs	ENG 108	9 mths	TOEFL 61

preparation for the tests and for application materials. Some agencies also offer one-year-long high school courses to help students pass ACT, SAT or TOEFL tests required by the institution they planned to apply for. See Table 3 for the participants' reported usage of the services provided by their chosen study-abroad agencies. The students' learning experiences specifically related to language tests preparation and application materials writing with the assistance from the agents will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Table 4. *Reported Usage of Study-Abroad Agency Services*

Service	Yes	No	N/A
Exam preparation	8	6	3
School selection	11	4	2
Preparation of application materials	15	1	1
Filling in application forms	13	3	1
Mailing out of application materials	14	2	1

### **Study-abroad Agency as Liaison**

The roles of the consultants of agency were their familiarity with the U.S. higher education system and provided the students' different perspectives and cultural values they have not been exposed before. In addition to exam preparation, the agents provided various services ranging from the selection of schools, application materials preparation and submission, the visa and immigration process, or even the assistance with housing.

**Professionals with experience and knowledge.** For the students, the agency's services were important because of the consultants' familiarity with the application procedures and professional knowledge of the materials or documents required by the US

colleges. They also worked as liaison among several parties--students, their parents, high school teachers, and the U.S. institutions. For example, there are some documents, such as company statement or bank statement, and the English translation versions of those would be better taken care by parents, and the direct communication between the agency and their parents would be much easier. As Tina explained, it was easier for their parents to ask for the transcripts from their previous schools. "If we were to tell them, and didn't make it clear, or remembered wrong, it would be a headache." Jimmy explained that neither did themselves nor their parents had the experience. To save time for their parents, and "to avoid mistakes, those were better to be taken care by the agents." John had the agency drafted the recommendation letter in English and let his high school teacher signed it afterwards. Dixon summarized that "everyone used an agency; no one has the experience."

In addition to particular documents, such as bank statement, the agency's role as guidance or providing clear timeline and steps to follow was rather useful. For Gabriel and Ken, they completed the required materials by themselves, but Ken said that "because they are professional, and you just did what they told you to do", and Gabriel thought "there wasn't much interaction...I only needed them to give me some guidelines, reminder of the application procedures, such as making payment at the ambassador."

**Materials completion and qualification enhancement.** During the whole preparation process, the students had varied level of involvement in terms of writing or other documents submission. The involvement of their working with the agency also affected how much knowledge about the cultural differences related to U.S. education.



The process of preparing materials also varied among different agents in terms of the involvement of the students' own work and the additional assistance in enhancing the qualification. The form or the level of the assistance varied. Some students had the experience of working more closely with the teachers or "advisor" at the agency. Ken drafted his personal statement himself firstly and then the staff or advisors at the agency helped revise the document, while John had a list of questions about their personal information to answer and draft in Chinese, and then the staff translated it to English. Tina worked with the advisor on application materials, and received suggestions on schools she could apply for. They would help them come up with what to write in the application in the form of a list of questions, such as "life experience, such as your hobbies, the awards you've won, and so on, personal information."

Some advisors would tailor the assistance based on individual students' needs. For example, Kate and June would discuss with the teachers at the agency to estimate their performance or the scores in the exams to select schools, and discuss the majors. In addition, Kate mentioned how the owner of the agency would follow individual students' progress and offered more supervision, such as asking them to memorize vocabulary each week, or introducing them to other language teachers to discuss their proficiency levels. June appreciated the advisor's monitoring their effort and guiding their direction for the preparation. Simon also had the experience of the agency advisor reminded him of the application progress along the way and one advisor further helped him practice interview questions by asking him to "just repeat after me, practice speaking these well; answer the question like 'why did you come to the States with such low TOEFL scores' and then you should answer them in this way."

While the agency's services played a significant role in facilitating the preparation of application, some students noted the importance of individuals' contribution to the working process of the materials. As June expressed, she valued the cooperation or the mutual communication with the agency:

They still prepared materials based on the writing completed by myself or on the facts. I wrote many materials myself, and she just edited it. After all, our English and other aspects were not that good, and our written products were not good enough. She would help revise it, and then I was involved in the process, unlike those agencies which separated you from the preparation process totally.

Kate viewed her majoring in communication as one of the reasons why she was able to provide more sufficient or adequate information in Chinese than merely answering a list of questions or surveys filled out by other students. From there, the advisor was able to identify "things that are interesting or would attract the attention of the admission committee."

The involvement of individual students' ideas or information also plays an important role in the whole process. In addition to the language improvement, the agencies also encourage students to seek for different ways to enhance the qualification. Kate explained the "general phenomena in China" of how agencies seeking for the parents' cooperation to enhance the student applicants' qualification. She explained,

My aunt is a high school teacher, so my GPA must have been changed. There were also other cases that, for example, a good friend of mine got admitted to the Hotel Administration of Cornell University, which is probably the best one. She didn't have the qualification required, so the agent contacted all other students' parents, who were also in the hotel business, to provide her the internship certificate; something like that. As for myself, because my family is in this business, they can do those things for me too. They [advisors] kept pushing me to find these materials to strengthen my background.

The comments on the services the participants made demonstrated the extent the agencies assisted students in preparing themselves and looked for various strategies to make the application more competitive. In this regard, agencies seem to be the best resource to compensate students' unfamiliarity with the written documents specific in the States or lack of information and experience with the application process.

Some students had limited communication or interaction with the agency and had negative attitudes toward them. Jillian complained about quality of the application service and the steep charge fee:

The agent was rather “pit-like” [坑 *ken*], or money-driven. That is, it made more profit while not necessarily handled the work really well. I still managed to deal with many things by myself. I went to the agent only because there were many things that I didn't understand.

For Simon, he also commented that, the service charge was tremendously expensive and was not that useful. As an afterthought, he felt that the agency did not provide that much assistance, and “I could haven't done them all if I was actually capable of doing those.”

As can be seen from the experience the students had with the agents, the agents played an important role in the circumstance where neither the students nor their parents were familiar with application procedures. The varied and professional help the agents provided throughout the whole process could be rather useful and served as a bridge, or transition, for students who were not familiar with the American culture or educational systems. However, those who relied merely or too heavily on the agencies could also lose the opportunities of learning the relevant skills or knowledge to better perform in the overseas universities.

### **Data Collection**

During spring 2013, this project started as an exploratory study, the data were collected from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to generate students' in-depth experience in taking aforementioned three kinds of classes. Each interview had two procedures. First, the students responded to a questionnaire (see Appendix B for Chinese and Appendix C for English version) regarding background information such as age, city of birth, years of learning English, TOEFL scores, majors and whether have used agencies to apply for universities in the U.S. Second, students were interviewed for 40 to 50 minutes. All twenty-two interviews were conducted in Chinese by four Chinese-speaking researchers, and transcribed by the same interviewer.

The focus of interview adopted in this study has significant role in exploring learners' own interpretation of the contexts as well as their own account of the experience. Firstly, as Heigham and Corker (2009) compared that, while “[q]uestionnaires might tell us that students hate drills, that they find them ‘boing’ or ‘pointless,’ and their (recorded) behavior in class might confirm this, but only interviews can probe the beliefs and experiences that might explain their responses (p. 187).” In my study, the focus is on their thinking than observable behaviors.

In addition, I adopted the Talmy's (2010) perspective of viewing *interview as social practice*, which is different from *interview as instrument*. The latter, conventional approach focuses more on the content, the *what*, of the interview. The *interview as social practice*, or *active interview* (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003), value both the content as well as the “interactional [and] narrative procedures of knowledge production” and interview itself becomes “a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge” (p. 68), and “the interviewers' participation is significant participation is significantly implicated in

what the respondents end up saying, and how they say it” (Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006, p. 56). This is crucial to the definition of the context in exploring beliefs. Context is seen not as a static concept, a reflection for social interaction, but a “socially constructed, interactively sustained, time-bound phenomenon” where “each additional arena for subsequent interaction modifies the existing context while creating a new arena for subsequent interaction” (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992, pp. 5-6). The interview in this study should be seen as a collaborative process for knowledge production and data collection, and the attention should be directed to both content and the “linguistic and/or interactional resources used in co-constructing content and locally achieving the interview as speech event (Talmy, 2010, p. 140).

The four interviewers’ background and expertise were of significance in creating ideal sites for interview. Two of the interviewers also have had experiences teaching both mainstream and multilingual sessions of FYC courses at ASU. Among the four interviewers, two are from Mainland China and two are from Taiwan, with knowledge about the participants’ language learning experience to some extent. For example, they all went to similar test-oriented education, but two Taiwanese researchers may not be familiar with the larger influence on learning related to the specific test system, *gaokao*, and they would need to ask more elaboration on certain terms associated with the system.

In addition, the use of the participants’ first language will not only encourage the participants to express their insights as precisely as possible and meanwhile feel less nervous to answer interview questions, but also co-construct more linguistically comprehensible and culturally compatible. The researchers’ knowledge of the fields (i.e. composition and rhetoric) and the context (e.g. First Year Composition classrooms),

language proficiency in Chinese allow them to encourage the students use the language they were comfortable but also the situation or colloquial expressions unique in the students' cultures and articulate different ideas using different ways. These traits contribute to the potential richness of the data elicited from the participants.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

The data were analyzed in two stages, and all the original texts were kept in Chinese and only translated into English during the process of results drafting to avoid meaning distortion. All the data were stored and coded using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software.

In the first stage I intended to answer the first research question: “What are the L2 writers’ perceptions, attitudes and behaviors emerged in their account of past and current English learning experience?” I coded the data using framework of belief, searching for instances labeled as perception, attitudes, and behaviors. To better understand the specific contexts arousing the beliefs, I grouped them into two parts—(1) English courses in China, and (2) FYC in the U.S. With the data under the context of China, I then analyzed the data inductively to identify the salient and recurring themes and patterns.

### **Reliability of Coding**

To ensure reliability of my analysis, a second coder analyzed a 20% of the whole data, which are four student interview transcripts. The second coder was a Ph.D. student in Rhetoric and Composition, Department of English, who is also one of the native Chinese speaking researchers conducting interviews. I showed and explained to her my analytical framework of beliefs in identifying the units of perception, attitudes and behaviors and examples of each unit. We then went over one student interview to code

and discuss the discrepancies. The differences in our analyses occurred in the overlapped features of perception, attitude and behavior. Among these three, the latter comprises the former one but closer to taking actions. For instance, statement of describing teacher's lecture in class was coded as a "perception," while mentioning the preference toward the lecture was coded as an "attitude." I decided not to do double-code because the single-coded statement can better represent the nature of belief-infused thinking. The perception could be merely what students noticed in the process of learning but not necessarily something they have developed a strong reaction toward; the attitude, in contrast, refers both the situations or objects they have been aware of and also have their own evaluations and expectations. Behaviors include the elements of perceived objects or situations, and the attitudes toward them, which trigger learners' decision to take actions. After the discussion, we analyzed the other four samples to calculate the inter-rater reliability, which was 92% matched rate.

## CHAPTER 4

### TRACING THE TRACKS:

#### FORMATION AND TRANSITION OF ENGLISH LEARNING BELIEFS

This chapter aims to present the participants' perceptions, attitudes and behaviors in the process of learning English across different contexts before coming to the U.S. There are two phases identified, formation and transition of English learning beliefs, occurred in English language classrooms in China and later in the Intensive English Programs for academic purposes in the States. In the formation phase, students' belief of English learning was memorization of grammar and vocabulary; in the transition phase, the students still believed in the same exam-orientation instruction as the dominant strategy, which would best help them meet the goals. These two phases influenced the students' interpretation and subsequent reactions in the context of FYC classrooms.

#### **Formation Phase for English Learning Beliefs**

The first phase is the formation of language learning beliefs, shaped by the higher entrance exam system, *gaokao*, and the learning styles mainly geared towards test preparation. This section reveals what they perceived to be the main activities and teaching pedagogies in English learning, their negative attitudes toward memorization and teacher's role as the authority and themselves as followers, by listening or obeying whatever comments from the teachers. Their negative attitudes toward this educational system and its impact on high school learning has also prompted their decision of studying abroad.

#### **Belief**

**Economic approach is the best method of language learning.** When asked



about their previous experiences of learning English in China, the students responded predominantly on how *gaokao* has impacted their overall English instruction and their approaches to learning English. High school curriculum in China is largely shaped by the National Higher Education Entrance Examination, also known colloquially as *gaokao*, literary “high test.” This annual test is taken by millions of high school graduates seeking entrance to universities across China. Such high-stake tests have a longstanding history in China since they have shown to play an important role in students’ educational experiences at secondary education level (Cheng, 2008; Gao, 2008). For most of the high school students, *gaokao* was the only gateway to top universities in China. The students become aware of the *gaokao*, the sole criterion for university admission. All schooling, especially middle- and high-school curricula, is oriented toward readiness of *gaokao*, resulting in a trickle-down effect as pressures on students, parents, and teachers. The individual students’ academic performances were not indexed as personal efforts but evaluated against the shared goals of the high school set, rather small part of the collective sum of the larger educational system.

### **Perception**

**All the instructions were exam-oriented.** The students’ perception of English instruction in China was focusing mainly on improving the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary as well as reading comprehension. In *gaokao*, English is one of the mandatory subjects, such as Chinese and Mathematics and other subjects, taken depending on one’s intended major. English test includes listening comprehension, reading comprehension and an essay section, but not speaking.

The process of improving listening was limited in the practices of answering exam questions; the opportunity of speaking English was merely responding to teachers' in-class questions. Dixon described the English class as essentially practicing exam questions as preparation for *gaokao*:

Dixon: At school, basically the teachers didn't care about speaking and listening; they cared more about grammar and reading abilities.

Interviewer: What was your English class called?

Dixon: It was called *English*.

Interviewer: It was just one English language class, and no other separated sessions?

Dixon: No. All we did was prepare for *gaokao*; listening and speaking were not the focuses. Of course, we did some listening practices, but speaking was not included.

Interviewer: How did your teacher teach you different ways of learning English?

Dixon: We just did practices, multiple choices, and more readings. All we did in the senior year was doing reading practices every day.

The whole process of doing practices for Howard was test-taking strategy learning. For example, Howard noted that,

English teachers in China placed more weight on grammar and... test-taking strategies, preparing for the exams. They taught you whatever content was in the exam.

It can be seen that learners' conceptualization of English learning as oriented toward *gaokao*, which was reinforced by teacher's instruction.

The importance of grammar and vocabulary was also applied to writing, which is the last item in the test. In the essay writing section, there are two prompts, each requiring 50 to 60-word responses (See Appendix G for sample writing prompts). Four students, Tonya, Jessica, Jimmy, Ken, indicated that their teachers kept emphasizing the importance for them to expand their vocabulary and memorizing more big words, fancy

phrases and complicated sentences. Tonya related composition writing to template memorization:

In China, every time we wrote compositions, we had to memorize different templates...The teachers in China would give you a topic, and then you wrote it on your own first. Later, they gave you a perfect sample writing and asked you to learn from it.

Jessica summarized that, “writing composition is essentially about [learning] templates, memorizing model texts.” The process of learning writing was the extension of all the elements mentioned above—memorizing various templates and fill them with better or more complex sentence structures, phrases or vocabulary. For Ashley, “There is only input, and no output” in terms of the learning process.

### **Attitude**

**Value of test-taking strategy in language learning.** The test-driven education not only affected teachers’ pedagogies but also students’ attitudes toward English learning outcome. Toward the end of high school, or time approaching *gaokao*, the focus of learning was put on preparing for exams questions in previous two years. Jimmy described these test-driven pedagogies as teachers’ telling them “where the mistakes were, and you just had to memorize them.” Ken asserted that, “In China, it’s all about teachers’ forcing you to learn.” Some students casted their doubt on the applicability on the test-taking strategies for future use of the language. Dixon commented on the strategic approach as having limited help on their English development outside the scope of exam preparation:

They [teachers] focused more on *gaokao*, a piece of exam sheet comprising 60% of the readings. You just did reading practices every day. You then acquired a set of strategies, and relied mainly on the strategies to take exams. In the end, the teachers taught you all the strategies, just like TOEFL, instead of raising your overall

proficiency level. You didn't get to learn speaking [skill] that much, and listening was pretty easy in China. You can't improve your actual English proficiency; you've learned all these years for the sake of *gaokao*.

Similarly, Tonya described all the practice as being limited to “paper and pencil, or multiple choices at most; but while in real life application, I'm not that proficient.” June expressed her negative reaction toward English learning tied with *gaokao*, and highlighted the practicality of English as a goal of learning:

English teachers in China wouldn't correct your pronunciation; all they cared about is your grammar and grades. I don't like that at all; for me, the things you learn have to be something useful or applicable in the future, or else you don't have to learn it.

While some students viewed these memorization and test-driven practices as with limited use in the future and thus negative attitudes, two other students stated the positive value of this approach. Dixon believed that the English knowledge or ability he learned in China served as an important foundation for continuous learning and use of English in the States:

If I didn't learn [it] in China, it's just like you are about to learn a totally foreign language. It wouldn't work.

Kate took the perspective of economics, and acknowledged the needs to satisfy the requirements of *gaokao* as the immediate context, and vocabulary took the central role of the pedagogy:

They tough you some *top-speed approaches* though you still have to learn on your own. More importantly, they are *efficient and economical*. For English teachers, especially in China, they mainly emphasized vocabulary. Vocabulary for them is the king's way [*wandao*].

For her, the memorization approach in the whole learning process was tedious and demanding but most “effective”:

All I did was just memorizing vocabulary, reciting the texts in the textbooks. But I felt that the most efficient way is some rote learning, such as copying the texts, translating the whole article. Anyhow, this is the most effective but most time-consuming approach--just read the texts again and again for the exam.

From the responses shown above, we can see students' perceptions and attitudes toward instructions on English, which were heavily shaped by the teachers' pedagogies and emphasized abilities. The wash-back effect of *gaokao* was not limited to the classroom learning, but further triggered students' decision of studying abroad.

### **Behavior**

**Seeking for a brighter path.** The students perceived the *gaokao* system as a restriction on their past and future learning opportunity, associated larger social and educational contexts, which became a driving force pushing students to look for a different learning environment—U.S. higher education. The *gaokao* system has been accused of regional bias, “primarily because schools often set quotas for the number of students they will take from each province, and students from their home province have more available spaces than students from remote provinces” (Custer, 2016). Since the best schools, both high schools and colleges, are mostly in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, this essentially means that students lucky enough to live in those areas are better-prepared to take the *gaokao* and are able to enter China's top universities with a lower score than would be needed by students from other provinces. In other words, if students' *hukou*, a household registration identifying one's residency, were not in the major cities, they would have to compete for few seats even if they scored really high.

The grueling ordeal of preparing and taking *gaokao* but limited seats available forced some of the students to give upon pursuing higher education in China through

*gaokao*. For Tina, this *hukou* factor became another hurdle to this already extremely competitive exam and her attempt of taking another path:

The reason why I wanted to study in the States was that I didn't want to take *gaokao*. The regular high school I attended was really exhausting. On one hand, you had to take *gaokao*, but I didn't want to. In China, or in Shandong province, even if you scored really high, you can't enter really good universities. For the Project 211 universities<sup>3</sup>, they only accept a few students from Shandong. So, it's pointless or impossible to get into the top tier universities...I might as well choose to study abroad.

Some of the curriculum restriction or requirements tied with *gaokao* assuring students' preparation became a force deterring some students from attending the exam. June mentioned teacher's discouraging her from taking *gaokao* because of her absence in the intensive reviewing sessions in the senior year<sup>4</sup>.

I wanted to take *gaokao* but my teacher didn't allow me because I didn't attend the senior review course. At that time, I was preparing for TOEFL tests. Then he said that my scores weren't good enough and would drag down the average scores of the whole school.

The students' performance or success in the exam was more than personal but also other stakeholders—schools and teachers. The teachers' salary was also hinged on the. Ken expressed this frustration of feeling like a burden for the teacher.

In high school, even if I really wanted to try harder... I've made lots of efforts, but because I've become a drag on the teacher's salary. I had to give up unwillingly.

To stay away from worrying the unsatisfactory result, John made the decision even before taking *gaokao*. Dixon reasoned that, if he could not enter one of the first-tier

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<sup>3</sup> **Project 211** (Chinese: 211工程, pinyin: *211 gōngchéng*) is a project of National Key Universities and colleges initiated in 1995 by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, with the intent of raising the research standards of high-level universities and cultivating strategies for socio-economic development.

<sup>4</sup> The senior year in China consists of review only. They do not learn anything new. All they do all year is intensive review and study the past exams that have been given.

universities in China, studying abroad is a “better way out” than attending the second-tier universities.

While *gaokao* served as a hindering factor forcing students to study abroad, just over half of the students described their concern over the slacking learning atmosphere of universities in China. June expressed her belief that she could not learn much from college in China citing the commonly-held perception that Chinese colleges are *strict in admission but slack in graduation* [yen jin kuan chu]:

The education in China was tougher before college. But after entering college, as long as you take the exam, and get the score of 60 at least, you can pass the class. Even if you failed, you can take the make-up exam. You don't need to retake the class. So, I felt like not being able to learn anything substantial.

Sheldon's decision of studying abroad was because either high school or college education was suitable for him. He had acquired the impression from his friends that college learning was more of socialization:

When I was in high school, I already thought that high school or higher education was not suitable for me. I felt that studying in high school was all for *gaokao*. So, under this “can't be helped” circumstance, and the only one way out was...my parents were able to provide me with a better chance for me to get a feel of it [studying abroad]. That is one reason, and my hope to learn more things is another. Many of my friends said that, studying in college in China was probably more about social experience, but not academic knowledge. So, for me it was a waste of time in college; we should increase more knowledge instead of stepping into the society prematurely.

He also thought that the time on preparing for TOEFL test would be worthier than reviewing for *gaokao* exam.

During the phase of high school, till junior year, you've learned everything you were supposed to learn. In senior year, it was mere preparation for *gaokao*; it was just a phase of review, not learning anything new. This period of time could totally be used to prepare for language tests or application materials for studying abroad. It was not a waste at all.

The students also perceived U.S. education as encouraging diverse perspectives, having abundant resources, and more career opportunities in the future. Their positive attitudes or ideas were from their friends or their parents. For example, Shaw believed that his major, biology, was more advanced in the States and would benefit him in terms of future employment. Kate thought that engineering fields in the States were slightly better than China; Zack felt the educational resources in the States were richer than those countries, such as Canada and Australia. Ken commented that “after all U.S. after all doesn’t become a super power country for no reason.” Ashley, with sport scholarship, commented that American education was “beyond question, the top one of the whole world, not one of the best, education.” In addition to their own understanding of the western education, their parents’ expectation played an important role in their decision making as well. Sending their children abroad has become a social phenomenon, or a trend. John observed that, “For parents, it’s probably a trend now...like my dad’s friends in business, and many of them had sent their kids to study abroad.” Warren explained that it is “because my family wants me to get education with higher quality.” For Sheldon, the decision of studying in the States was multiple-layered, including his parents’ concerns over ethnic and racial issues, and his subject matter learning.

Firstly, I asked for my parents’ opinions. In their impression, U.S. is a country that encompasses different ethnic groups. But if I chose England or other countries, all they see is just their own people and are exclusive or might be discriminated people from other countries. This situation is a little bit better in the States. At that time, I wanted to major in business, so America could be a really good opportunity for me. Although America has gone through economic crisis, they are still financially strong, which could provide many things to be learned. Even if the employment opportunities or economic has gone down, the theories are still the strongest, so I chose to come to the States.



Ken was influenced by other people who seem to have gained richer experiences and advanced knowledge. While he expressed some gap between his expectation and the reality, he still saw the value of learning in a different environment:

Because of some external factors, like I heard that some elder family members' friends, whose kids seemed to gain more knowledge or experience after studying abroad. Every time we hung out I was attentive to what they said, and then wanted to come here. After coming here, I realized that it wasn't that good. But it is still better than staying in China because I am out here and get trained in a totally different environment.

In sum, the students had clear conceptualization of the goals and the learning process shaped by *gaokao* system. The roles of the teachers and themselves as test-takers aiming for higher scores, and the focused learning scope on grammar and vocabulary was the necessary means in China because of the exam content. Their negative attitudes toward high school and college learning, as well as positive attitudes toward U.S. education were the results of different layers of considerations and influences from various parties, such friends and parents. Their behaviors in the classrooms were passively receiving the instruction on grammar, vocabulary by memorization, and following whatever teachers' comments were. To stay out the loop, they sought for a better way out by studying abroad in the U.S.

### **Transition Phase for Reinforced English Learning Belief**

The second phase is the transition stage into U.S. higher education at three different contexts, including taking TOEFL training courses to enhance their four skills, using study-abroad agencies to apply for schools, or attending IEP as college preparation courses. I will discuss the students' experience at TOEFL training courses or IEP and how their perceptions and attitudes reinforced their previous conceptualization of English

learning process, and discuss the roles and importance of study-abroad agencies in terms of the cultural and educational features the students acquired through the preparation process.

### **Perception**

**Product versus process-oriented instruction.** The students expressed their interpretation and the evaluation of the English abilities developed at this stage and the teaching efficacy, compared with their experience of preparing for *gaokao*. Exam preparation courses for studying abroad include other tests such as the SAT and the IELTS, but most participants frequently related their experiences with TOEFL tests. Most of the participants described TOEFL training process as test-taking strategies oriented, similar to *gaokao*. According to Kate, the training program provided a rather intensive learning pace with a unique environment. She went to the training course affiliated to a well-known agent, and learned English with the “typical approach,” which focused on memorization and doing drills:

The students all over the country went to Beijing, which was the typical approach of Beijing *Xintongfang*<sup>5</sup>. They enclosed you in a secluded mountain area, where you lived. We went to classes every day; after class, it depended on your self-awareness. And then it was more about memorizing vocabulary, doing exercises, and so on. But during this process I found listening as the most difficult skill to review because the teacher wouldn't be able to give you much help but only some strategies.

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<sup>5</sup> New Oriental Education & Technology Group or *Xintongfang*, is now the largest comprehensive private provider of private educational services in China, based on the number of program offerings, total student enrollments, and geographic presence (New Oriental Education and Technology Group Inc., 2017)

While the process may seem similar to the preparation for *gaokao*, she pointed out that the self-awareness was the key in this learning process. June explained teachers' instructions as "targeted training," including reviewing the past exams, identifying the key phrases from dissected texts as well as predicting the possible questions:

It is exam-oriented education, or *the* exam-oriented education in China was, they could dig out all the previous examination questions of ETS. They provided you with targeted training, such as telling you that "when you do listening exercises, you don't have to listen for other parts; just pay attention to the sentence after "but"; the parts before "but" was rubbish. They could even tell you what kind of questions would appear in an article like this, or in listening section.

The focused learning on strategies was applied to learning writing as well. Simon described the learning of writing as filling in certain numbers of arguments into a formulaic structure:

The teacher told you to come up with three arguments. Among three arguments, the first one has to be an overview, followed by a...supporting idea, and then a concluding sentence.

For the students, the instruction of TOELF training courses they received was similar to their experience with *gaokao*, yet more specific and strategic in analyzing and predicting the exam questions.

IEP, with the same goal as TOEFL of preparing students for better language abilities in the U.S., was perceived to have less value of gaining knowledge but more of practical purpose. Among the nine students who had experience of taking IEP in the States, seven of them went to the same IEP affiliated to the institution, ASU, of this study. In order to get admission into ASU, the students have two choices, either obtaining required TOEFL test scores or passing all the levels of courses at IEP with decent scores. While these two paths both set the bar for the language proficiency, some students saw

IEP serving as a space to enhance what they have learned before. Ken expressed that “the teacher did not teach enough [content],” and “the biggest help was providing me a space to learn things on my own.” He explained that, his motivation of studying English harder was “not wanting to stay there for too long; it’s a waste of time and money.” Dixon also observed that most of the Chinese students went to IEP only to maintain the student status to take TOEFL test. In describing the course content, Jimmy perceived it as “totally repetitive of what we learned in high school...he [the teacher] used the American approach to teach the knowledge we learned once again.” When asked further about the “American approach,” he explained that in treating grammatical error, the teacher would “explain to you why you should write this way, instead of just saying what it should be as English teachers did in China.” Writing, as Tonya explained, was normally handwritten one-page long practice, much easier than memorizing different types of templates in China. Ken thought what he gained at TOEFL program for one year with intensive training was way more than the sum of English learning from elementary to high school.

### **Attitude**

**Mixed value of communicative approach.** Perceiving the similar content, the participants turned to improvement of oral communication. Tonya valued the skills of speaking and listening improved at IEP. For Tonya, the listening exercises were much harder due to the longer texts of the materials and practices. She also attributed her becoming more familiar with different accents other than Americans to the interaction with classmates from other countries, mostly the Middle East. Dixon said that he did not care how much he learned at the program; instead, he saw it as a “transition stage,” or a buffer zone before entering college. He explained that, he thought his English proficiency

was not improved because of IEP courses, but the opportunities and time speaking English in interacting with other people. He made comments on how other factors influenced his expectation regarding the in-class interaction or group discussion, including peers' proficiency and the teacher's pedagogy and peers' proficiency:

[A]t IEP, most of them are low proficient English learners, like Korean or Japanese. When you talked to them, they didn't understand you. Sometimes they didn't say anything, so I can't continue the conversation. After the discussion, the teacher wouldn't pay more attention to the content of the discussion, or say something like "why didn't you say anything?" The teacher would just say, "Okay, the discussion is over," and then prepare for the next project.

In addition to the environment, the students also concerned about the impact of student population at IEP on their learning efficacy. For Dixon, the presence of the Chinese students as the majority also affected the dynamic of class interaction:

Dixon: Basically, Chinese students stayed together and said, "Okay, now we can speak in Chinese!" Some teachers wouldn't mind our speaking Chinese, but some did.

Interviewer: Which do you prefer?

Dixon: [Speaking] With foreigners, of course.

Interviewer: So, no Chinese students around?

Dixon: The "good little devil" in my head says that, but over time, it would tell me to just stay with Chinese.

While he preferred to have the more opportunities practicing English, he admitted that he himself would lean toward staying with his Chinese-speaking peers, the comfort zone.

One student, Sheldon, has tried to make sense of the different approaches to language learning between TOEFL training courses in China and IEP in the States. Comparing the learning process of IEP and China, Sheldon noted that the students' attitudes toward English learning were affected how they perceived the functions or the purposes of learning. He explained the changes of the environment and the extent they would use

different skills or language made him aware of the learning approaches should be different as well:

The English we learned for studying abroad in the past was English on paper. You probably know what it is but you might not be able to understand or speak, that kind of English. But as for the English I learned after deciding to study abroad, it can be totally applied everywhere in daily life, the type of English which translates the theories into practices. Some people might be illiterate, but they could communicate, interact with other people, which means that it's a very easy thing. But in the past, probably because we were in class or what, there was no time for you to speak the language. If you only needed to recognize it, your speaking abilities would deteriorate. Later, when you need to communicate with other people in English right away, or express your thoughts in class, you will realize that you didn't know how to say something, or use English to talk to those Americans or British, those speakers of English. So, you would feel that the English you learned before wouldn't be that useful—it was just for exams or based on theories. But afterwards you'll realize that, English needs to be “used,” you will feel that you will want to learn yourself, instead of being forced by the teachers because you never know where you can use it after learning. You felt it was only for exams. So, this is the difference between coping with exams and then being forced to learn versus applying English and then being active to learn.

For Sheldon, the realization of the purposes or the real use of the language was crucial in the attitudes toward learning. He further reasoned that the “educational ideology” informed the pedagogies of different courses in the two countries:

Yes, at least for me it [TOEFL program] was more helpful than American approach because education in the States is not exam-oriented; they [teachers] won't talk much about taking exams. For example, from elementary schools, the ideology is to cultivate a way of thinking, instead of preparation for a test... So, educational ideology is one thing. For Americans, exams are just tests, and how much you learned should be proportional to the exam results, but with intensive review. But for Chinese, you can raise the test scores to another level through reviewing and learning persistently within a month. For the purpose of taking exams, this type of learning can improve your performance shortly. For Americans, exams are to test the accumulation of daily learning, but not that [intensive review], so what they taught wasn't appropriate for the need of raising the scores within a short period of time.

He pointed out the cultural influence on the ideology for education. English education in China was efficient in terms of meeting purposes, while limited for particular exams:

It was useful for raising the scores in a short time, but it is open to discussion when it comes to what we really learned. That is, it is short period of time, and too much information. What you remembered was just for that moment, but afterwards you may forget, like 60% or 70% of it. It was just for dealing with tests.

From these findings, we can see that students had similar perception of the IEP courses, but different attitudes as well as personal realization of the goals and consequently behaviors. Some of them still valued more of the past test-driven approaches, some focused on self-awareness of the goals. These can be seen as individuals' attempting to figure out the best approach to learning and using the language.

### **Summary of the Chapter**

It can be seen that the students had their own interpretation, or critical understanding of the purpose of learning and the corresponding, or appropriate teaching pedagogies facilitating their learning progress. They perceived their past English learning experience as heavily exam-oriented, focusing on reading and memorization of vocabulary, grammar in China and even more specific in TOEFL training programs. They have formed this belief of using the most strategic and economic approach to preparing for the exams. During the transition stage, IEP programs, became a space serving the students developed two different attitudes toward the pedagogies and interaction with multilingual learners, and consequently different behaviors. Some students perceived IEP instruction as being less test-oriented, and chose to continue to study English in the ways that were practical in satisfying the immediate goals. Some students saw the opportunities of improving communicative abilities, which were not the focuses in their past learning in China. However, their attempts of practicing speaking English were restricted by their perceived context, in which Chinese speaking students as

majority and their own struggles of stepping out of the comfort zone. These experiences were then translated into their learning writing in FYC classrooms.



## CHAPTER 5

### BELIEFS OF FIRST YEAR COMPOSITON

Chapter 4 documents the L2 students' past experience of learning English in China, showing the paths of the formation of their language learning beliefs and the transition into U.S., which shaped their attitudes toward language learning process. This chapter presents two aspects of learners' writing beliefs—one on composition learning and the other on writing development. The construction of belief of composition learning were identified from their perception of the process-oriented curriculum, attitudes toward the project-based assessment and behavior of negotiating their performance. The second section, belief of language development shows how students perceived the role of grammar and vocabulary, and how these concerns affect their attitudes toward pedagogies, consequently the behaviors of seeking linguistic assistance.

#### **Belief of Composition Learning**

##### **Belief of Practice Makes Perfect**

FYC for the majority of Chinese-speaking students might be a fresh new concept—new curriculum designs, instructional approaches, content (e.g. genres, terminologies, or theories), and assessment. The classroom interaction with the teacher and peers, in class tasks and out-of-classroom activities could be strikingly different from their past experiences as well. The belief in “practice makes perfect” is reflected in their perceptions of the writing content and process, attitudes toward ideas development and incorporating feedback, and the behavior of making their effort visible for the teacher to receive higher grades.

##### **Perceptions**

**Writing content as more than grammar.** Most of the students commented that the FYC instruction focused on writing, which was rather repetitive as their previous English learning experience. For example, Simon explained the repeated content of argumentation writing in FYC:

The teacher had to explain again and again, at least two or three times. In China, you've learned that several times, including TOEFL test preparation courses, not to mention in high school.

Jessica commented that, "In China, it was all about grammar, articles in the textbooks and exam questions. Here it's just about writing compositions." Tonya thought that FYC writing tasks were much easier than memorizing various kinds of templates in China. Zack expressed that the various templates or test-taking strategies he learned for IELTS can be applied to the writing tasks of FYC as well. Shaw thought the correctness of grammar was still one of the requirements of writing, but the overall structure of the essay was similarly important.

While the content seemed similar to what they learned before, some students highlighted the requirement for ideas. As Jillian noted that FYC teachers emphasized the ideas or thoughts in the writing in addition to the correctness of the overall structure. Sheldon explained that, in China, due to the time constraint, English proficiency was the focal abilities they had to demonstrate, and writing proficiency can be improved after multiple practices as in FYC. The main difference lies in that they had to present their own perspectives:

Writing abilities will be improved after every practice. The only difference is the idea. At that time, the requirement was just writing a composition. You have to, within a short period of time, complete a composition like that, the type of writing coping with the tests. For example, given a stipulated time, you complete the composition; you don't have to write too much as long as you demonstrate your

English proficiency well. Now they [FYC teachers] gave you abundant time to compose, to consider, and to complete an essay. You have to demonstrate not only English proficiency, but also your thoughts and many other things. These are the differences.

Regarding the ideas, Ashley viewed FYC course as facilitating the development of critical thinking. As she explained, FYC teacher would encourage them to think on their own. The assigned readings would also inspire her “to answer the questions by sharing my real thought,” which can be seen as her using composing and reading for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communication.

**Writing process as making texts longer.** Another feature of FYC curriculum the students noticed was the process-oriented pedagogies involved the strategies of producing longer texts and receiving feedback from various parties. The writing tasks of FYC, according to Warren, were 1000-word writing, “ten times longer all of a sudden” than the English courses in China. The instruction for him was “how to write longer texts, and how to make arguments.” Dixon also commented that with the lack of substantial content, the teacher only “assigned projects, gave you some structures and let you visit the writing center for revision.” Jessica concluded that FYC writing was just “preparing for writing projects.” Zack also described the process as “just writing up the essay and then revising it again and again.”

The emphasis on the process rather than solid content about writing has caused students’ uncertain or conflicting interpretations of teacher’s responsibility and their own roles as the writers. John said he was “always wondering” that the teacher’s “not seeming to teach much,” and the process of completing essays was “practical” as they spent the

time on revising drafts for the assigned projects, visiting the writing center, and doing peer reviews:

In China, the teachers would explain some tips. But here, it is making the texts longer each time and then revise it, a process like this.

Simon described the content of FYC as “exactly the same as IEP or even more boring” and was a process of preparing for the project and receiving more feedback:

It was like, okay, we had a paper due, and then we went back to write the essay. Then we went to the writing center for feedback, and then wrote a few more drafts; then it’s done. We could browse RenRen, or Facebook in class—nothing interesting, so boring.

June also thought the whole writing process as boring because “the teacher often asked you to read an article and write a summary or something like that, which was annoying.”

While the teacher would explain the structures, or logics, she thought the teacher “didn’t say much and you just did most of the writing on your own.” Ken described the writing-revising cycle FYC as story-telling, by letting teacher and students share with each other their stories:

Today he held the textbook in hand and said, “Okay, let’s turn to page something. Today we’ll write something unforgettable.” And then he was like “The most unforgettable for me was my mom...bla bla bla, and my son...bla bla bla.” And then we just discussed, like chit-chat, for half of the class time. When he felt the time was over, he would let us discuss on our own, for the other half of the class. Before we dismissed, he just finished the explanation of the project and left.

The teacher would explain the expected organization of each project only at the beginning of the introduction to the new writing project, and the rest was just “preparation for the submission” by themselves, such as writing up a list and exchanging ideas with peers. He described this process as “watery” and concluded that the goal of the

FYC curriculum was teaching the basics, and students themselves being responsible for the project completion:

There's not much to say about the basics. All you have to do is just write, and revise it later. The rest is just making sure that the organization is correct.

While the students felt that the writing instruction was not too different or challenging from their previous English courses, their attitudes toward what they perceived as the features of FYC curriculum.

### **Attitudes**

**Classroom interaction and discussion.** During the process of preparing for writing projects, many students noticed that FYC consisted of much in-class discussion in relation to their learning motivation. As some students explained, the teacher would initiate the interaction, require students to participate in the discussion, and establish mutual relationship. Tina observed that small capacity of the class allowed them to have more discussion opportunities. Hillary commented that that while most of her other college courses emphasized interaction, only FYC had the much lengthier discussion. Some other students believed the interaction and the teacher's personality also increased their learning motivation. Sansa noticed that FYC teacher would require students to participate in the discussion, while in China the students just listened quietly to the teacher's lecturing. Shaw observed that FYC teachers tended to have more interaction with the students, with closer and more equal status than in China. He also thought that the teacher's being more humorous than other subject matter courses with mostly lecturing was because of the exam-free curriculum. Shelby saw the teacher's willingness to joke with the students would encourage them to respond, and further motivate them to

learn. Dixon also attributed FYC course as the easiest one for teacher's being "chill and humorous" and not giving too many assignments, which lowered the stress level. This type of interaction, for Hillary, led to more practice of oral communication:

Our teacher also knew that we Asians don't like to answer questions autonomously so she would ask everyone to answer her questions, which was pretty good. I would respond actively in class to practice my oral speaking, which opportunity was missing in China.

Some students mentioned that the teacher's different pedagogies in facilitating in-class interaction would help enhance their learning motivation. John also mentioned that his teacher wanted the students to ask questions and would join in the peer review to check in the progress. Tina thought her teacher's rich knowledge about cultures of Middle East and China served as the shared language for discussion with the students. June also described the student-teacher relationship in FYC classroom as less hierarchical with teacher's pedagogical activities of sharing daily life as well as conversation, while in China "they are teachers and you are students":

In class, he would share something, like the party he had this week, on Schoology, and asked us to post our photos too. Because none of us had the experience of doing tasks like this, he offered us extra credits and then, everyone was starting to do it. Under each picture we needed to write why we wanted to share it, say "my friend and I went to an event." So we all were sharing our lives, and teacher would tell us interesting things he encountered throughout the whole semester. He would also play music when we were writing in class. Sometimes there would be hilarious conversation going on, such as some students wanted to listen to this song while the others didn't. Then people sometimes would argue or joke around... Unlike teachers in China, FYC teacher would be much closer to the students and let you feel that you could go and ask him questions directly whenever I have questions. With Chinese teachers, I was hesitant to ask.

The students also saw the interaction leading to different learning outcomes, such as oral communication and specific feedback on their language development. For

example, Ken thought that being involved in the discussion process would prompt him to react faster, which is “also a process of making progress.” The mutual relationship of discussion allowed him to disapprove what the teacher said, which was “impossible in China,” and further provided an opportunity to clarify concepts or even facts:

If there was a question, we discussed it. We just argued back and forth and the truth will come out.

It can be seen that the students held different evaluation toward the long section of discussion. Some believed they can improve their communication skills and to express their ideas freely.

**Rhetorical situations and ideas.** Four students mentioned the obstacle of meeting the required word limit, and the difficulty included generating and developing ideas for certain writing tasks. Hillary explained that the 1000-word essay was challenging because she had never done so before. Tonya expressed that meeting the word limit requirement was the most difficult part:

In class, the teacher asked us how our writing went, or what our biggest problem was. Everyone answered unanimously--“We can’t write 5 pages.”

For her, producing long texts was common challenge for everyone. In addition, the continuous revising drafts without receiving grades for each draft, made her wonder if she actually improved over time. She can only tell the progress from the increase of quantity but not necessarily quality. Shaw was only worried about not being able to produce the required lengths of the essay. Tonya found it hard to come up with more ideas for the observation essay:

I just felt with the building, I’ve written whatever I could find or whatever I could think of, but I just ran out of the things to say. I then tried to think of different scenarios, conversations and add dialogues to add up the words.

Tonya mentioned the heuristic, or the prompt given by the teacher for them to develop ideas, but she was confused about the answers to the prompted questions for the project provided by the teacher:

Like who do you think your audience is for this essay, why they'd be interested in it. And I just didn't know who would be interested in my essay nor why. I just didn't know what the answers are.

She expressed her confusion about the purpose of these questions in relation to the essay because she still did not know "what to write" in her essay. Ken simply said he would forget to keep audience in mind during the process:

The teacher had specific requirements for who your readers would be and what kind of product you were expected to submit. But when you were actually writing the essay, it was rather different. I totally forgot them.

The concern of target readers, for Sheldon, would impede his development of the perspectives presented in argumentation essay:

My classmate wrote about gay issues. I'm against it because of some religious or cultural reasons; I'm just against it. What he wrote was more in favor for it, and he didn't mention much about the opponents' thoughts. I thought an essay should include both positive and negative sides, while he believed he only had to indicate his own stance in the essay. I told him to write both sides, which he didn't think of in the beginning.

In his understanding, a good piece of writing for readers should be an objective concept and evaluation, but not the content, which would be only persuasive for half of the audience. In other words, the rhetorical consideration of the audience's needs influenced his approach of presenting arguments. Kate mentioned taking a stance in the genre of argumentative essay was another obstacle because her understanding of both sides of the issues were legitimate:



The topic was “argument,” in which you have to debate with other people. I didn’t understand it well because the translation I found was “an essay on moral controversies.” As long as there were moral controversies, there wouldn’t be any stance—both sides could be right. But the thing is, till now, I still didn’t do well in this essay. I’m still in the process of revision, and I just find it difficult to take a stance in this article, to make the position clear. I am still in a situation where I can’t make my stance clear even if I keep emphasizing my standpoint.

She attributed this inability to form or take strong stances as one of her individual traits, which also resulted in the difficulty in understanding the issue of the essay.

Two students mentioned the difficulty of learning some specific modes or genres, and preferred more explicit instruction. Two students attributed the difficulty of learning a new genre to the lack of related experience or knowledge in Chinese. For example, Jillian noted that the assignment called as “explain a concept” was not only new but also “more academic”:

The essay we had this time is “explain a concept,” which was the type of writing I’ve never learned before. I’ve only written about describing my own stuff, important things or observation, which are easier for me.

June was uncertain about the genre of “proposal,” which “I have no idea what that is exactly because I don’t know the Chinese term of it either.” Compared to general explanation of the concepts, the sample essays teacher provided were more helpful in that she can use them as a template to brainstorm the content:

For me, whose first language is Chinese, I had no idea what that is. After he gave me an example, it was easy to know what you should write about basically. That is, after reading the example, I can think of what I can probably write in the essay.

While rhetorical situations and new genres posed some difficulties for the students, some students saw the training of FYC as fostering the skills of addressing different issues. Sheldon concluded that writing served different purposes in other courses:

One is more professional, and the other is giving you many different things to write about. Take Bilingual Education for example, the target audiences were the students in education and ELL, and you wrote about specific objects and things. But FYC is more general—it gave you something, such as a topic, and then you can write every aspect of it.

For Sheldon, FYC required them be able to address a broader scope of issues and audiences. Sarah, however, saw this process as “pretending that you cared a lot”:

Although the teacher told us to express our opinions, there’s no such kind of person who would actually submit a report or things like this. It’s just totally fake—pretending that you cared a lot about the topic and came up with many reasons. You spoke vehemently but there’s nothing else afterwards, nothing. You won’t be writing emails to a department or continue the proposal.

Another aspect related to the writing process for the students was the difficulty of producing appropriate content for the project was the ways of presenting arguments and taking stances. The students perceived that the course content in the sequence of FYC courses moved from writing based on personal experience to writing based on conducting research. In presenting their ideas, the students expressed two challenges, including incorporating different resources and enhancing the connection between claims and evidence. Sheldon explained that his ENG 108 teacher’s pedagogy was providing open-ended instruction and requirements:

He would relate the topic of the essay to some little things instead of giving you an instruction for the essay. He just gave us a broad concept or topic for you to write an article, and some suggestions for going about it. For example, the essay we wrote was called “a problem to solve.” We just wrote about a problem and then the solutions. It was just a requirement like this, nothing else.

For him, he had to complete the project solely based on his own experience or “imagination” as well as incorporating much research. Howard pointed out that he had to cite other resources so as to go beyond describing personal experience, and convey the ideas “clearly, thoroughly and more specifically”:

For example, I wrote about gun control, which in 107, you were only required to describe the problem, and then state your viewpoints. In FYC 108, you had to not only present your stance, but also propose solutions, and quote other people's research to prove your arguments right. Yeah, just go deeper.

Citing resources for a few other students mentioned the learning of citation practice was not only one of the requirements but also cultural-specific knowledge to acquire. Howard found quotation to be "hard to deal with." June realized that while correct citation practice was emphasized across disciplines, and she could only learn that in FYC courses:

In biology, the lab report, if you didn't follow the requirements, he would take points off, a lot, including references at the end. At the beginning, I had no idea that I had to write these things. But if you didn't, he would consider that as plagiarism, or give you zero point. This is serious.

For her, she had learned about organization of Chinese writing in China, so learning citation and its related practices, as one of the cultural differences, was most helpful content in FYC. Similarly, Kate found the citation practice to be painful, and thought this knowledge needed to be taught repetitively:

For learners in the States or other countries, it [citation] is pretty common because they had to do it since childhood. The teachers thought they've mentioned once, or your previous teachers must have taught that.

Dixon appreciated the teacher's individual instruction on the right "frame," the format of the documentation, such as the author, date of publication, and website link. Kate believed that the citation practices she learned in FYC was culturally-related concept, and interrelated to the three main challenges in her writing process—citing resources, choosing topics, and taking stances. She found this citation practice "hard to get used to" because she had never learned this in China. In addition, not knowing how to differentiate the other people's ideas from her own was still another difficulty:

If you used someone else's work, you have to indicate it. But the most common situation was that, I don't think it is a quotation.

One student, Simon, shared his strategy, "adding water," to incorporate references regarding the complexity of language translation:

Simon: After completing the first draft, you had to add an academic something, search...

Interviewer: Reference?

Simon: Right.

Interviewer: You meant you found some references?

Simon: Yeah, actually you can "add water" to this. Super easy. For example, when I said the population in China year 1980, I can *Baidu* [Google] it, which is definitely non-academic. So, there are two ways to go about this. First, after you *Baidu* it, there would be a window pops out, showing which article it is from. You can then just jot down the source. The second way is to search for the key words, *one-child-policy* in the school database; you can find something there too. If you just can't find the information elsewhere, you could write something and made up a book source. The teacher would definitely check it out, sometimes. You can then write "*transform* [sic] from Chinese, Chinese book transform," which he wouldn't be able to find.

For Simon, while recognizing the possibility of committing plagiarism, he still believed that he did not copy the whole article but only a few sentences to fulfill the teacher's required numbers of references. He further added that, incorporating other sources was excruciating in achieving cohesion of the texts:

The information you wanted is like pain in the ass. You have to think consider the transitions between texts, so we'd rather not to copy it. It's just a headache.

For Simon, learning citation involved with transition, or linguistic expression to achieve cohesion, which remained a thorny issue. As Leki (1995) reminded, L2 writers have brought and developed different coping strategies in response to new situations, and some of them are creative and flexible. In this case, however, it is important to discuss further its applicability or appropriateness regarding the teacher's pedagogical consideration.

Recognizing the significance of individual arguments, some students expressed the challenges of strengthening the connection between claims and evidence. Ken noticed that, the most challenging part of writing was the weak relationship between arguments and supporting details:

You realized that the grammar, vocabulary and expressions were correct, but the score was not high. It's because of one serious mistake—the arguments. Your examples can't support your arguments.

Some other students mentioned different attitudes toward the process of looking for information and incorporating resources into the paper. Two students, Jillian and Tonya, found the opportunity of either checking the information of the chosen topic online (e.g. Starbucks) or making multiple trips to observe the place as helpful. Sheldon viewed “operation of ideas,” the difficulty of developing the whole essay. He adopted teacher's suggestions of enhancing connection between the examples and claims as well as different perspectives for the issues he was working on.

Later the teacher commented that some of them were too thin, not that persuasive, so I had to revise them.

He then tried to incorporate evidences or examples from the readings to enhance his arguments:

I then read many articles and provided a series of examples to explain why this problem was more important or back up my arguments.

Simon, expressed the difficulty of searching for specific information for his chosen topic:

It wasn't easy to find references because it's unlike academic articles where you can just Google them. You can only search it on ASU school webpages, which may not contain the information I needed either. I don't know which department I should look for. In the beginning, I thought TA was paid with cash, which was incorrect. Later when I went to the writing center, the tutor was a girl, and she happened to be a TA. She told me it wasn't what I thought, and then I went back

and revise my paper. My teacher herself was not sure about that either, so I did a short interview with her.

For Simon, the difficulty of writing was to locate the right information in places where he and the teacher were not sure, and had to look for other ways.

Tonya adopted the teacher's suggestion on adding dialogues, as well as drafting overall plans for meeting the required length:

Just every time before starting to write the essay, I would think about what to write systematically, and estimate how many paragraphs were needed and how many words for each paragraph so that I can hit five pages.

Warren's strategy was to pick the topic, which he was more familiar with and can think of many examples:

Interviewer: Why did you choose the topic [video game]?

Warren: It was easier to write about it.

Interviewer: In what way was it easier, in what aspect?

Warren: You can provide many examples, such as taking up too much study time. If playing too many video games, children would not want to study, or things like that.

Interviewer: After picking that topic, how did you make it to 1200 words?

Warren: Just by providing examples, one after another.

Interviewer: What strategies have you learn to make your essay longer?

Warren: Providing more examples.

Interviewer: Is that the only way? Nothing else?

Warren: At least I don't. I don't know how I could produce such a long essay like that.

The above are the challenges the students perceived and the strategies learned or developed. The large amount or length of writing they were required to produce, and multiple drafting and revising process have created opportunities for them to practice writing considerably.

We can see that, from the students' responses, writing process of making texts longer was a challenge and the consideration of rhetorical situation also caused their uncertainty of connecting the arguments and the appropriate supporting evidence.

**Teacher comments versus peer feedback.** In revising the paper, the students have found the teacher feedback covering various aspects of writing, from global to local areas, to be beneficial. Jillian and Zack received the suggestions on selecting the topics and the ways of narrowing down the scopes of the essays such as observation. Some students received teacher feedback on strengthening the perspectives presented in the writing. Ken's teacher helped correcting some viewpoints at the early stage of listing ideas as brainstorming. Jillian accepted the teacher's suggestions on making more insightful conclusion for an observation essay:

She asked me what kind of conclusion I came up with after the observation, and why I chose this place. I said, as a Business student I'd like to know how Starbucks succeeded. Then she said this idea was really good and suggested me do more analyses for the last conclusion.

Many students found teacher's feedback to be more helpful. Tonya and Jillian received teacher's evaluation of the essay and comments on cleaning up the content. Jimmy commented that FYC teacher would provide more comprehensive feedback concerning every part of the essay as well as detailed analyses and explanations of the grammatical errors, such as tenses and appropriate vocabulary for certain situations. Howard believed that teacher's feedback raised his self-awareness of the mistakes:

Sometimes when you were writing, you can't see the problems. But when you show it to the teacher, he would find many errors.

Kate preferred the teacher to make certain expectation more explicit, especially the new knowledge she had not learned before. She realized that in writing argumentative essays,

she should skip foreshadowing [鋪墊 *pu-tien*] in the opening and go straight to the point or else the readers would lose the interest in reading along.

One time the teacher was joking with me in class by saying that, “the sentence you wrote is really good. But you know what, all the Chinese students I know would add some unnecessary information at the beginning of every essay.” I mean, in English, they don’t seem to like it. If he didn’t tell you, who would know it.

Sarah found teacher’s individual feedback during office hours more helpful than the in-class instruction. Jessica expected to receive more feedback from the teacher, whose had limited availability for each student:

After he read my first draft, I went to him again for more feedback. He said “No. Everyone has only one chance. If you all come to me, I’ll be swamped.”

The students’ interpretation and ways of incorporating feedback showed that they valued the teacher’s guidance on developing ideas, focuses of the writing and direction for further effort on the work. While most students seem to favor teacher’s feedback for directions of revising their project, Jessica interpreted it as an idiosyncratic taste for writing:

In my first draft of narrating an event, the comment he gave me was “To show, not to tell.” He told me that, ‘You should add more vivid descriptions like “someone said something, and then someone else said something too.” Just add as many dialogues as possible.’ I think this is just his personal evaluation; maybe other teachers prefer something else but adding dialogues. So, it doesn’t count as high requirements, but his personal preferences.

This also shows that, in their mind, writing requirements or expectation as personal preference, and the students’ responsibility was to draw out the implicit rules from the teachers. They perceived this two-way communication as an equal relationship, which allowed them to express their thoughts freely.



Unlike the interaction with teachers, communication among peers for the participants seemed to appreciate different insights peers can bring to their paper, but also some other concerns lowering their confidence in the effectiveness of peer feedback. Three students, John, Shaw and Jimmy reported that most of the classmates seemed to have similar proficiency levels and did not have communication problems. Sheldon saw the helpfulness of receiving different perspectives by interacting with peers from other countries. He thought people speaking different first languages would achieve different English proficiency levels or master specific skills better. These variations would affect how different learners process information in English:

In TOEFL or other language tests, people from other countries and we would score differently, having various levels, and thus can still help you. Moreover, even if the scores were the same, in the subcategories of the test items you might perform differently. For example, I'm good at listening and he's good at reading. He could get information from readings, and I could help him with the information I receive from listening.

He explained that various perspectives on different issues were closely related to the “educational methods” different students received. However, he also saw the downsides of individual readers' thoughts and investment in the paper as factors influencing the quality of the feedback:

If someone's taste or viewpoint was too far from you, that particular train of thoughts may be useless for your essay.... They can provide bigger help with grammar because the way they see things wouldn't be as thorough as the way you did research or wrote this essay. He could only point out some grammatical errors in language use, or vocabulary.

June believed that unlike other assignments, many students took the peer review task seriously. She found the feedback to be useful and felt contented when receiving positive comments. Ken thought in class instruction, both the teacher and the students could be

careless or slacking, but everyone would take peer review sessions seriously. The peers read each other's papers carefully with the aid of the evaluation sheet the teacher provided. He commented that, the peer reviews could "solve many problems once and for all."

Some students saw the benefits of peer feedback for their content developments. For example, Jillian would look for ideas by asking her peers, and Sansa thought that her peers were able to provide different perspectives on her essay. Zack would incorporate the peer feedback into his revision. John tried to describe a place and the peers reminded him of the parts missed. Howard received some more specific feedback such as the parts needing more research to back up the arguments, or some more "general opinions" such as repetitive information in different paragraphs. He explained that "at least they were readers, and can spot the mistakes that you wouldn't be able to see them on your own." For them, the peers' perspectives served a second set of eyes for their writing.

In contrast to the positive attitudes toward peer review, other students brought up some factors affecting the effectiveness of peer review, including the issues related to student's own attitudes, experience and English proficiency levels. Jessica viewed her classmates as unreliable resources because she did not take the peer review seriously herself, and thus did not trust in the peers. Warren thought his not being good at providing feedback would make his comments less useful than the ones given by other peers. Sarah found the peers' comments to be irrelevant or insignificant to her own writing:

Everyone was bull-shitting, "I think he wrote well," "He wrote very well." Any other mistake? Nope... "Do you think there's anything s/he needs to improve?"

“Well, I think you can expand this and that.” They just wrote these carelessly. Everyone was like that I felt.

Sheldon also addressed the situations where the peers were not familiar with the topics of the essays they were reviewing, which might be culture-specific and could only comment on language use:

They would give you some suggestions, but as for the issue I wrote about, non-Chinese students may find it difficult to understand. It was more like reading news or some other articles; they didn't have strong feelings for it so they wouldn't have many questions about the event. They only responded to language problems, such as grammar or structure.

Compared to the peers, he thought that the teacher was more experienced and had read more, and could provide more thorough opinions. Warren thought that the teacher and peer feedback were pretty similar, while teacher's comments were more detailed because of the proficiency:

The feedback from the teacher would be more detailed, and more in quantity; after all, the teacher's first language is English. My peers were around the same level of English ability, making it [feedback] different from the teacher's.

Sarah has rather negative experience with peer review because of the conflicting opinions she received from the peers and the teacher:

I used to hate peer review because all the peers who reviewed my papers said they didn't understand what I wrote. They all felt that I wasn't making sense or I was off-topic. But when I went to the office hour, I asked the teacher if I went off topic. The teacher said no. I told her that the two peers said I was off topic and he said no—it's just that they didn't understand it.

These findings showed that the students noticed the requirements of arguments or ideas developments as challenges. However, their varied evaluation on teachers' comments and peer feedback has led to their interpretation of the usefulness of different types of suggestions.

**Flexible and performance-based assessment.** In addition to the writing process, some students interpreted the multiple drafts and the project-based assessment as flexible grading but effort-demanding. The major difference was the major assessment on the three essays, weekly assignments, in-class performance and attendance. Shaw felt that learning was simply less stressing when there was no exam. For John, the exams or tests in the courses such as biology or chemistry, the grading was “solid”—the scores reflected only the performance in each test. Tina described the overall structure design as simple but time-consuming regarding writing essays, visiting the writing center multiple times for revision as well as email correspondences with the teacher for feedback. She thought the course did not seem to be difficult but “it’s not particularly easy to make the essay better”:

It’s like knowing what to do in this class, and know what she is going to say, and what she said would definitely be related to the writing assignment. I can get the most out of the main ideas, but it’s when I was writing, I just did not feel it good enough.

For Jessica, FYC was relatively undemanding or more manageable on weekly or daily basis, and the only difficulty for her was the need of spending much longer time than other native English-speaking counterparts.

The reported unchallenging content and process-oriented writing assessment has led some students to see the self-directed learning as the key approach. Jillian said she took a more serious attitude toward FYC course because “every assignment counts and I care a lot about grades so I needed to do the assignments well.” Ken pointed out that self-awareness was the key to learning because of teacher’s strict grading:

Ken: There’s nothing difficult in this course, but if you don’t make efforts, you won’t pass.

Interviewer: Because you still had to write some up, and then he had to give you grades.

Ken: Right, although he didn't teach much but still graded our work harshly.

Actually, it was good that way because it urged you to...

Interviewer: A reminder for you to work harder?

Ken: It's better to be motivated to learn than being imposed by others.

He saw the active attitude fostered in this type of situation as a positive outcome.

Kate simply stated that that "FYC teachers helping them become a person who has the ability to learn in other courses." In contrast, Sarah commented that this emphasis on self-learning process made FYC a course "not having the necessity of existence":

If you said you learned format, you'd know it just by Googling it. Actually, in ENG107 and until now, I learned everything on Google.

Ashley thought that the more serious attitude she demonstrated in class, the more individual attention she would get from the teacher and thus better grades. Simon also saw maintaining good relationship with the teacher would help him to pass a course:

Because at IEP if you wanted to pass, you have to build a good relationship with the teachers, and then you have to chit-chat with them, *hey, you know what, in China...* and then sometimes you had to ask him to take a look at your writing.

The interaction was viewed as not solely for the quality of writing but demonstrating the effort or individual's visibility in addition to in-class participation.

On the other hand, a few students chose not to have much interaction with the teachers for various reasons. Hillary explained that her interaction with teacher was mainly in class because the teacher told them to visit writing center to talk to the tutors. Howard simply preferred to write on himself first when he was full of inspiration at the moment. Jessica and Warren both attributed their non-participation to their being shy and preferred to just listen to the teacher's lecturing.

## **Behaviors**

**Negotiating for effort credits.** Most of the students described FYC as relatively easier and felt less stressed because exams were replaced by projects. The project-based assessment prompted the students to adopt various strategies and resources to negotiate their performance or meet their own expected outcomes. The results also showed the students' confusion or uncertainty about the relationship between the project-based assessment and their progress in writing.

Under the perception of process-oriented writing and project-based assessment as the features of FYC, the students developed different strategies for obtaining higher grades. Some students believed that “the effort will pay off,” and revising process was a guaranteed means to obtaining higher scores. June saw the relationship between grades and effort as positively correlated because “as long as you go and ask the teacher, you’ll get good grades”:

If you were willing to devote time and energy [in this class], talk with the teacher more often, the teacher would check your writing again and again. And if you revised the paper again and again—you would get a pretty good grade, which is just impossible in the courses like math or chemistry, in which you might get high grades if trying hard, but it also depends on your performance at that time, or the difficulty of the exam questions. English class wouldn’t be like that.

In addition to revising the paper, some students saw the discussion with the teacher as an opportunity to receive specific feedback to get higher grades as the ultimate goal. Sarah thought that while the course content was not challenging, what matters was the effort or time invested in the class. She also noted the importance of teachers’ making the grades visible because “if you wrote something and he gave you a score for your first draft, you could just revise and get another grade again and again.” These beliefs about the relationship between effort and grades caused some conflicting or unexpected results.

June expressed her frustration of not receiving higher grades after revising her paper following teacher's feedback:

I talked to him at the end. I felt sad because I did visit him. He let me revise my draft, and told me the paper would be okay if correct this place—it would be perfect. But after I turned it in, the grade he gave me wasn't what I expected. For example, I thought I could at least get an A. But he gave me an A- for the first draft, and a B+ for the revised one. I can't help but wonder why it was so. I asked him for feedback and he told me it would work if I revised that way. But the grade turned out to be like this.

While she commented that, "I knew this is not the teacher's fault," she was depressed about the mismatched results of following the feedback for improving her essay and the grades. Sarah also acknowledged that the relationship between the effort and the grade was unpredictable:

To put it simply, how much you do is not directly proportional to how much it pays off. For example, in the course I got an A easily, the work I did and what I got back was not proportional. Sometimes you did little but still got a lot in return. Sometimes you did a lot but you still got a really low grade in your first draft. It's hard to find the halfway point.

The students perceived their writing progress stamped by the grades of the drafts, a tactic of teachers' ensuring multiple attempts or continuous practice. Their attitudes toward project-based assessment were either positive for it encourages continuous work by incorporating feedback.

Based their perceptions of the similar writing content and the multiple-draft process, the students perceived the curriculum as teacher's providing general guidance to complete the whole projects. The process involved several steps, including producing multiple drafts, interacting with various parties to receive and incorporate feedback, and generating their own arguments. The challenges of citing resources and taking stance were related to the with the new cultural-specific practice and the unfamiliarity with the

rhetorical situations and readers. They held positive attitudes toward mutual relationship in classroom interaction, the opportunities of allowing them to express ideas, the whole project-based assessment with flexible grading, and mixed evaluation toward teacher and peer feedback on their writing. While they did not have full control over the factors influencing their writing, they turned to see the connection between individual efforts and grades. They sought for various opportunities to make their effort more visible so that they can surpass the imperfection and to achieve the expected outcome. The behavior mentioned by the students also resonated what Zamel (1995) observed, “While these students acknowledged that they continue to experience difficulties, they also voiced their concern that these struggles not be viewed deficiencies, that their efforts be understood as serious attempts to grapple with these difficulties (p. 512).”

### **Belief of Language Development**

#### **Belief of Grammar and Vocabulary as the *King’s Way***

This section provides students’ experience of language learning in FYC—what and how the students discussed the aspect of language issues in composition in relation to their expected learning process and outcomes. The findings show that the students tended to see FYC as a language course. The process of learning is also the refinement of conventions by expanding the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, which for them was the indicator of “good writing.” Their attitudes included viewing linguistic issues as the main challenges and mixed evaluation toward the feedback they received from the teacher and peers. Their behaviors were consequently influenced by the belief and sought for the opportunities of increasing their linguistic knowledge.

#### **Perceptions**



**Attention to grammar and vocabulary.** Many students noticed the teacher's attention to grammar and vocabulary in their writing as one distinguishing feature FYC course. The knowledge and proficiency growth of writing was crucial in their writing across the curriculum. June viewed FYC as the only course related to learning English as a language, and emphasized grammar. Warren believed that by practicing more writing as required in FYC, he could improve grammar knowledge and to obtain higher grades in writing for his subject matter courses. The teachers in other courses only cared about the correctness of the arguments but not grammatical errors. She further contended that, grammar was rather important in that, "even if the teacher didn't care about the grammatical errors, you have to make yourself understood; it's important to be more idiomatic." Sheldon described his FYC teacher as being stricter on the ideas and grammar than subject matter teachers:

The writing in those [subject matter courses] requires you to demonstrate your comprehension of the learning content as a process, instead of caring about the grammar or how well you can demonstrate your English proficiency.

Dixon viewed FYC as a language course with a focus on writing, and would help with his future writing in the subject matter courses:

I felt since I just came here for half a year, and I'll have to write a lot in my study. ENG 108 is still like some other basic, writing courses in high school, and letting you write the stories around you, or something like that. It basically raises your English, not that professional.

The students also noted the approaches to teaching grammar and vocabulary of FYC teachers. Gabriel labeled FYC class as an English language course taught by native English-speaking teachers with similar pedagogies in China. Jimmy believed that "in

learning English, you have to deal with vocabulary and grammar.” In China, the learning approach was deductive—focusing on memorization, while in FYC, it was inductive:

It [the approach] was focused on finding them from the articles. You would get an idea after reading the articles and then think how to use the vocabulary and grammar.

In the students’ mind, FYC class was the only course related to language learning among all the courses they were taking. They still perceived grammar and vocabulary as the abilities to be developed.

### **Attitudes**

**Their proficiency and the course level.** When discussing the challenging level of the course, the students evaluated their own proficiencies from different perspectives against the course content. Some students were more confident in their oral communication. Six students, including Jessica, June, Kate, Gabriel, Shelby and Warren, were more confident with their speaking and listening. Some other students felt that they have gained more improvement because of learning in their own disciplines. Ashley did not have problems with listening and speaking, and reading and writing had been improved because of considerable writing she did in her major, Journalism. Dixon felt his listening had been improved, and doing online assignments or writing emails with teachers improved his reading ability. For Ken, he could at least make him understood, and was more confident in writing since he had invested more time in. His interpretation of writing skills was that they refer not only the amount of expression but also “the storage of the knowledge, and grammar, all of them.” Shaw found listening more challenging because “Americans speak really fast and so I didn’t always understand

everything in class.” Kate thought that the learning materials of TOEFL exams were rather different in actual classroom environment:

Normally, Chinese students would score high in reading and listening in TOEFL. They didn’t pay much attention to speaking skill, but mainly to exam questions. Maybe they’ve prepared well for the tests but still have some difficulty in interacting with the classmates or other Americans.

We can see that the students had varied evaluation of their own English proficiencies and attributed the progress to their individual experiences of the environment as well as learning process. This shows that the students understood the threshold of composition course rather differently.

When asked about the difficulty level of the course, many students thought it fit their proficiency based on different reasons. Five students, Hillary, Jillian, Howard, Shaw and Dixon, thought that the course matched their own levels. Jillian thought this class was suitable and hoped to get an A because she never missed a class, did all the assignments, and received positive feedback of her paper from the teacher and the writing center. While the course was not challenging, Hillary and Howard thought that the teachers’ strict grading criteria would raise requirement of the course higher. Ashley gauged the difficulty level of the course against how much time or workload she had to manage among all other courses taken in the same semester:

Yeah, I think it was suitable for me. Although it was not difficult, if it was too hard I might be...I have other courses and I didn’t have that much time for a difficult course. The key is, the course wasn’t hard but I still learned from it. For example, I’ve done all the required reading, which I found to be pretty good. I also revised the essays several times, and I did think it through.

These results show that the overall difficulty of the course for the students was not cognitive aspect, but the extent of how much they met the requirements and the overall time spent in meeting various aspects of the assessment of FYC course.

**Speedy writing and language learning.** When asked about the progress they made in the course, some other students saw the ability to write faster or more efficiently as major improvement. For example, John believed that FYC had provided the opportunities for him to practice writing much more often than his other subject matter courses. This writing habit had also helped him overcome the anxiety and found the five-page writing tasks to be more manageable overtime. Ken phrased this improvement as “speedy writing”:

Maybe I still have to go back and revise it, but your ability of turning the writing into the piece, which meets the requirement is enhanced. In the past, I probably need a whole night, but then it’s five, four, three or two hours.

Tonya and Jillian simply stated that their “words increased” was an indicator for their progress. Simon thought FYC helped him maintain his writing proficiency or he would “forget how to write.” Sarah thought being forced to produce writing systematically was important:

Sometimes if you haven’t written anything for a while, what you write is all that, you know, the things you can’t bear with it yourself.

Gabrial found it helpful that the process of “mostly writing on your own, way more.” For Jimmy, FYC was about English learning, and the teacher helped him identify the weakness and the specific area of knowledge he needed to work on. Ashley highlighted that, teacher feedback and the revision process reduced the chances of making similar

mistakes. It can be seen that the students saw the abilities of producing more content within shorter time as an indicator for language improvement.

Some other students commented on the technology use served different purposes for teaching and learning. For example, Kate explained that, under the constraint of class time, where everyone was writing really fast, she had to look for alternative vocabulary to express her ideas, or further check if the usage is appropriate because of the new vocabulary she just encountered. She also found this Google document as a medium for her to observe and learn from others. She explained that, the requirement of finding errors in peer feedback activity was rather challenging for her because this is also her weakness, and “even I know you’re wrong, I still don’t have the confidence to correct your mistakes.” The real time writing practice instead helped her gain more knowledge and confidence in doing feedback. Ashley observed that writing activities on Google document served multiple purposes for the teacher—checking students’ writing and ensuring students’ more practices of writing in addition to drafting the three projects. She explained that, the students would lose interest or attention in class with too much lecturing. The in-class sharing writing exercise would ensure students’ participation and more practices. However, Sarah raised the doubt on purpose of the heavy use of online editing software blurred the boundaries of physical and distant learning:

Of course, I don’t have problems with the software Google doc, which is convenient and suitable for distant learning; everyone can share and edit the same documents. It shouldn’t be like this--when you physically get to the classroom but everyone was typing in the Google document. You only raised your hand when you had questions to ask.

We can see that individual students viewed the value of technology used in class for the purposes of sharing and editing each other’s writing.

**Idiomatic expressions for unique voices.** In addition to the quantity of writing, some students expressed the significance of the instruction or feedback on more idiomatic phrases to express their ideas for different purposes. Ken commented that, “what’s taught in China is not conflicting but different.” For example, FYC teachers taught mechanics, which were not taught in China; on the hand, they just brushed lightly over relative clauses, which were explained extensively in China. Sarah thought that vocabulary is valued both in China and in FYC, and her FYC classmates tended to ask the teacher about the explanations of certain idiom or phrase. Three students, Shelby, Warren and June appreciated the teacher’s correction on their grammatical mistakes. June described her teacher as being serious in checking her vocabulary and sentences and taught her how to revise the inappropriate ones. Kate emphasized that memorizing vocabulary is a must because “if you don’t do it, you wouldn’t be able to learn it [language] well.” Thus, she found the activity of vocabulary tests beneficial for the process of her looking for alternative phrases directly in English:

My teacher would ask everyone to find a couple of new vocabulary in an article. We would then have an exam, in which everyone had to find the English translation for the words. In China, it was always English-Chinese translation, and you had deeper impression of the definition in Chinese. But this teacher’s approach was pretty useful—the first term I think of is English and then I could come up with many synonyms right away.

She also appreciated the teacher’s explanations of the word origin, “a simple but useful thing,” which helped her learn more vocabulary in a less painful way:

To put it this way, if you wanted to achieve the goal by making the process less strenuous, you can take a detour...After all, it is hard to accept the fact that I still have to memorize more vocabulary in the State. Secondly, it’s hard to get motivated.

She also found it useful that the teacher's individual feedback on her writing by providing alternative phrases or sentence structures to replace the repetition. She adopted the same strategies in writing essays for her disciplinary courses that "I made that paragraph vivid, and my subject matter teacher liked it a lot too." Kate described FYC as a language course, and the teacher's role was to provide individual feedback on their grammatical errors:

For example, one time the teacher made a joke in class saying that, "the sentence you wrote is pretty good. But you know what, most of my Chinese students would add some redundant sentences at the beginning of all essays." I mean, in English, they don't seem to like that. But since our childhood, we've taught to add some set-up and then get to the point. Who would know that if we were not told so?

She believed that she had to learn about the grammar, stance, and ways of improving her writing from the teacher. She concluded that the role of FYC teacher was more important than in other subject matter courses, in which "some American students didn't attend the class but they still scored much higher than you because they had textbooks."

The students viewed the more advanced grammar and phrases as crucial in raising the quality of their writing—to represent their concepts in a more academic way. Many students expressed the lack of more vocabulary or phrases made their expressions seem to be repetitive, unidiomatic or naïve. Sansa pointed out the insufficient amount of vocabulary and sentence structures as most challenging in writing:

I felt like probably one third of my five-page essay was the repetition of similar paragraphs or the same ideas.

Jessica found writing descriptive essays challenging because the teacher only taught how to observe a place or the general organization of the writing, but she was struggled with monotonous phrases in writing descriptions. Zack expressed his difficulty in expressing

certain things, but he was unsatisfied with the repetitive vocabulary and phrases in his writing. Simon expected to express his ideas in a more advanced, or “academic” way. Jimmy believed that his lack of advanced vocabulary or sentence structures made his writing seem “immature,” based on his own perception and the comments of the tutor at the writing center:

It’s not professional. The first essay we wrote was our most unforgettable experience, which was more childish in Chinese--this topic is a cliché in Chinese. In English, if you don’t have professional vocabulary, or beautiful sentence structures, you sound immature. The tutor at writing center also commented that, “what you wrote was like the ones written by American elementary students.”

Two students thought that their first language intervened in the writing process. Howard thought his wording could not convey his meanings properly because of the “Chinese thinking abilities” imprinted in his writing. John found the process of changing Chinglish expression to “pure” English was unavoidable, which was the most painful process in writing. For Simon, he believed that “English writing is the reflection of Chinese writing—they both share the same strategies.” His knowledge and the extensive writing experience in Chinese can be transferred to English writing:

Simon: For me, essay organization or perspectives are pretty easy because I’ve practiced since childhood, and my mom has sent me to a class ...

Interviewer: Chinese writing class?

Simon: Right. Actually, I’m good at writing because I was asked to write self-reflection by the teacher all the time. I wasn’t allowed to go home without coming up with thorough insights.

Interviewer: Reflection? You mean repentance?

Simon: Yeah, repentance, and she would say “The reasoning is not clear. Go back to revise it.” “Okay, the concepts are not thorough and ideas are not clear, go back to revise it.” I’ve written a lot of this, and writing can be trained in this way.

These results were similar to Leki and Carson’s (1994) findings that, the students’ persistent, continuing need for expanding vocabulary can be attributed to three concerns,



being more efficient in retrieving appropriate lexical and grammatical forms, in need of precise match between expression and thinking, as well as the writing across their college courses.

**Peer interaction and language proficiency.** Some other students noticed that student population became a factor influencing the efficacy of group discussion. Shelby noticed that some Chinese students just did not pay attention to the teacher or know how to answer teacher's questions. They were not willing to speak up in class but only hanged out with each other. Jessica also observed that Chinese students would only speak English when talking to other non-Chinese students. For Tina, she thought that the topics of the exchange affected the language they chose; they would use English for peer feedback and Chinese for casual conversation. Dixon thought that, the lack of "common language" and insufficient confidence in his proficiency affected his interaction with students of other ethnic groups:

Dixon: At the beginning of this course, I felt repulsive when being surrounded by all the Chinese, so I asked myself to work with other non-Chinese students in the next few classes. After a while, I still stayed with Chinese more. Basically, in group discussion, Chinese students stayed with Chinese and Saudi Arabians stayed with themselves together, unless the seat you chose wasn't good and you had another Arab, who turned around and talk to you. Basically, it's the way it is.

Interviewer: Why did you choose to stay with other Chinese?

Dixon: This, essentially, is because in my mind I still don't think my English was good enough, and I probably didn't have much common language with Arabs.

Interviewer: What do you mean by common language? Didn't you have prompts [for discussion]?

Dixon: We may run out of the things to say in the middle of the conversation—really awkward. Sometime maybe we didn't understand their pronunciation or they didn't understand ours. Arabs are good at speaking but their grammar and knowledge of vocabulary wasn't good enough.

Dixon explained his feeling unnatural in speaking English with other Chinese speakers:

We felt it awkward if when speaking English to another Chinese, just a little bit...I have a teacher of engineering class, who's Chinese. Every time when he spoke in English, I had to speak in English to him if I wanted to ask him questions.

Jimmy felt the process of group discussion not easy because "everyone is still learning English, and none of them had particularly high English levels." However, he also mentioned that there were chances for mutual help, such as correcting mispronunciation of certain vocabulary. Hillary wished there could be fewer discussion activities, which took up too much class time, and most of the Chinese students still spoke in Chinese. She wanted to practice English with non-Chinese students to improve speaking abilities, even though she commented that "speaking [skill] wasn't particularly helpful for writing." Similarly, while Dixon expected that the teacher could mix Chinese students with people of different ethnicities, he also acknowledged the fact that the grouping options limited because of two ethnicities, Saudi Arabians and Chinese, composing of the whole class.

It can be seen from the students' attitudes toward peer interaction that, they were looking forward to improving their communication skills with non-Chinese students. However, the actual classroom environment had also posed some limitation on their attempt to get the most out of this classroom activity. The lack of shared topics would impede interaction with non-Chinese students, and the viewing Chinese as a default language for interacting with other Chinese students. The language proficiency and knowledge of different ways of maintaining interaction were the factors interfering with their involvement in discussion activities, and thus learning outcomes.

There are some other concerns the students had about the efficacy of the peer feedback. Jimmy expressed his concerns about the varied proficiency levels, which limited his feedback on vocabulary and grammar:

Interviewer: What kind of feedback did you provide?

Jimmy: Vocabulary and grammar, just these two parts.

Interviewer: You only pointed out vocabulary and grammar, what about their feedback?

Jimmy: [They did] the same because our proficiency wasn't to the level of being able to judge the problems of sentence structures, or the layout of the overall essay. Because everyone's level is different, if you told him the suggestions you realized to be wrong at the end, then you're doing disservice to them.

Interviewer: How did you know your comments were wrong?

Jimmy: After our exchange, our teacher would check our comments. We only marked the errors but if the teacher found it, she would tell you.

Gabrial observed that her peers tended to focus more on grammar, and the rest of comments were less constructive, such as "Oh, this is great. I like it. I agree." She described the whole peer review process, which normally took two classes, as "painful":

Having other classmates comment on each other's essays took a long time. Because everyone is a second language learner, and maybe some people's writing was just perfect and the questions weren't real problems at all; or, some of the questions weren't brought up. So, it wasn't effective.

Considering both the time and peers' proficiency levels, Gabrial suggested having other native speaking students in the peer review because "they are native speakers after all."

One student, Simon expressed his own belief of writing as an individual matter:

Interviewer: Did you try to have some discussion or writing emails to your peers?

Simon: Very few because they can't solve my problems.

Interviewer: You think they can't help you so you just write on your own?

Simon: Yeah, composition is like...how could possibly other people help you with composition?

Sarah also felt that the positive comments she received were useless either because she thought the suggestions for grammar mistakes were self-evident:

“I think the grammar needs to be improved” is just rubbish. Anyone whose first language is not English needs to have his or her writing proof-read.

It can be seen that the language issues involved not only students’ own concerns of the writing quality, efficiency, and their intended voices—academic and authentic. They also considered language proficiency as a factor influencing the interaction and the effectiveness of the peer feedback.

## **Behaviors**

**Looking for assistance with language expressions.** Aligned with their attitudes toward language, the students sought for other resources or assistance focusing on grammar and vocabulary. Some students attempted to solve this problem by looking for new vocabulary on Internet. Hillary explained that she had to look for better vocabulary on the Internet, which slowed down her writing process. Zack’s strategy was to look for the synonyms on Google to replace the unsatisfactory phrases after completing the first draft, but he still felt that “the essay written in this way may look weird.” On the other hand, Dixon did not think that the new vocabulary or phrases in the classroom instruction impede the students’ comprehension or engaging in the actual writing process:

When he was explaining it in class, there may be some new vocabulary but I can definitely understand the overall instructions. When I was ready to write the essay, I would check the requirements and just *Youdao*<sup>6</sup> the parts I didn’t understand.

He also viewed this writing process as the opportunities to acquire more new phrases or sentence structures:

In writing a paper, when you try to express something in a sentence but don’t know how, you check it online. Through looking them up online, you can get to know some sentences, or some vocabulary.

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<sup>6</sup> Chinese version of *Google* translation.

Some students paid the visit to the writing center firstly per teacher's requests, but also acknowledged the benefits of language improvement. Howard reported that he learned the most about expressions, the delivery of information, from writing center. Jimmy described that the tutor's suggestions on how to revise sentences or phrases would reduce the teacher's grading load because proof-reading paper has been taken care of. Other suggestions such as adding more evidence were helpful, while specifically to what to write. Jillian also received WC tutor's suggestions on the ideas for her observational essay such as what types of people or what kinds of drinks they like when she was writing about people waiting in line. John visited the writing center multiple times and noticed some "details":

I felt there were some questions or details I've never noticed before. For example, I always use small case...many details that I started to notice and get improved a lot. I just went to the writing center and revise it again and again.

A few other students viewed the importance of writing center from the sake of efficiency. Dixon concluded that the using writing center services as cost-effective regarding the grade as well as the quality of the essay. As he explained, visiting the writing center would help him get bonus as well as higher grade for the essay because "The essay you submitted to the teacher would be comprehensible for Americans."

Moreover, he also learned more idiomatic phrases:

He taught you the format Americans follow, and correct the thread of thought of writing you learned in China. For example, there are many phrases that Americans don't use anymore but we still do, like "What a pity." Americans say we should use "unfortunately" instead.

Kate described the services of writing center as "better and more economical" regarding the strategic and systematic feedback the tutors were able to provide. She explained that

the tutors were able to tailor the types of feedback or interaction based on the students' own purposes of either revising or submitting the assignments. For example, if time allowed, the tutor would elicit more information from the students to better understand the ideas for the essay or the requirement of the assignment so as to provide more individualized feedback on sentence structure or ways of expression. If it was toward the end of semester, "Everyone's purpose was rather obvious so they wouldn't ask you questions but go ahead correct all the grammatical errors like crazy." In addition to being flexible in meeting students' goals, the tutor also taught Kate about grammar based on the errors she made:

I'm bad at grammar, especially tenses. This person helped me the most. He would draw a table, showing how Chinese teachers taught us, and asked me "What you think?" Chinese teachers would only explain those on a blackboard, but few would teach you about your own writing in a systematic way.

Tina also emphasized the importance of having a second set of eyes on the drafts for revision to reduce the chances of losing points because of some errors on mechanics:

Well, don't believe in your own revision. Go to the writing center and get some help with organization and small mistakes, which you are just not aware of them at all, which would cause many points lost. Unlike other courses, which are real hassles, it's still easier to get an A at ENG and WAC. It's really bad if your GPA got dragged down because of this course. Just go visit the writing center more often, which could be done online as well, which is really helpful.

Some other students sought for help with language expressions from tutors at the writing center. Shaw asked writing center tutors for the vocabulary he needed for the essay:

For observation [essay], I was trying to describe the layout of the dining hall, as well as the instruments, which terms I didn't know...I went to the writing center. I drew a map and ask him to explain some of them.

John found it challenging translate from Chinese to English in a “pure way” and asked the tutors for a comprehension check of his attempts:

Sometimes even if I looked them up, I still felt that it wasn’t the idiomatic expression. For example, the sentence of “legs are like lead, not being able to move,” the metaphors I came up with but found it hard to ...

Jimmy expressed his confusion with the conflicting suggestions of the tense in his narrative essay form the teacher and the tutor:

Our first writing project was narrating one past event. He asked us to read a couple of articles and then ask us to write one about things in the past. I went to the writing center with my first draft. The tutor said it was alright, and told me that I can use present tense to describe a past event, providing readers some sense of engagement. But the teacher said no because this is what we learned now, and I had to follow that mode.

While many students held positive evaluation toward writing center, some students expected more explicit and direct feedback on the writing. Hillary complained that while the tutors mainly checked grammar, they sometimes “can’t explain the grammar well; they just didn’t know why it was so.” Jessica described the tutor’s feedback on the content as “this is your own essay, write whatever the way you want,” or “I think your essay is pretty good.” She concluded that the writing center was mainly responsible for checking grammar. While the quality of the paper was raised after the tutors checked the grammatical errors, her own grammar knowledge was not improved because “it is them who made correction after all.” Simon also viewed writing center as a place to fix grammatical errors but he observed that some of the tutors were “not responsible”:

They just checked your essay casually. Sometimes when they were tired, they just took a glance and said “oh it’s cool, good; it’s good, dude. Yeah, this paragraph is cool.” Then another teacher goes “*Oh, Simon, you have too much mistakes for*

*grammar [sic].” Sometimes he would help you but not much, you know. It’s all like “good, cool, how about it, cool...yeah I mean, yeah it sounds good dude, ok!”*

These attitudes led to the students’ expectation for more explicit explanations—they looked not only for grammar treatment but also the knowledge from FYC class. Jimmy expected to receive more help on grammar in class, which was not part of the lesson:

This course didn’t teach much about grammar. After you were done, he only told you that you were wrong, but didn’t tell you why. If you were revising the papers, you were on your own.

He came to the conclusion that, it was not the correctness of the grammar, but more of the teacher’s own expectation. He expected this to be addressed explicitly at the beginning:

On one hand, he didn’t tell you what tense you should use but he had this requirement. Actually, it’s nothing wrong with the grammar; it’s just not what the he expected. But he didn’t teach you that in class either.

Jessica wanted to learn more revising strategies for varied sentences or more advanced phrases. Ken while working on improving his knowledge on his own now, expected the in the next level of the course, he could learn “more advanced grammar, how to vary [sentences]...some technical stuff.”

The results also show the role of writing center—how teachers assigned the weight and function of writing center and how in reality students made use of it. It reveals students’ reconceptualization of the roles of writing center to serve their own goals or beliefs in writing center.

### **Summary of the Chapter**



This chapter has discussed two beliefs, one with composition and the other with language, and their relationship with perceptions, attitudes and behaviors. The first belief is “practice making perfect,” which they perceived the process of writing as mainly on producing longer texts through multiple revisions. Their attitudes include viewing generating ideas for the required length of certain projects, and different evaluation toward teacher’s and peer’s feedback. The behavior was using the opportunities to show their persistent efforts in incorporating comments into their paper, and diligence toward this class and the teacher. Belief of language learning is viewing “grammar and vocabulary as the king’s way” in writing, and perceived FYC as also a language. Their attitudes and behaviors are consequently focusing on evaluating the effectiveness of the grammatical feedback from the teachers, tutors, and peers, as well as their own strategies of overcoming the obstacles.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The goal of this study was to apply and validate my proposed theoretical framework for exploring multilingual learners' writing experiences. This chapter discusses the application of the framework and the findings regarding the participants' beliefs, perceptions, attitudes and behaviors. I begin with an evaluation of the theoretical framework in terms identifying L2 writers' beliefs with composition and language learning in FYC classroom. I then present different ways the framework could be used to inform further research and pedagogy. In the section that follows, I discuss specific findings from interviewing with the participants, and the conversation with them to draw on implications for pedagogy and research. I conclude the chapter with some limitation of the study and directions for future study.

#### **Validity of Framework**

The framework introduced in Chapter 2 was useful for exploring learners' writing experience in a more systematic way. The definition of belief and its construct was important to understand the existing beliefs influencing their learning, as well as the factors in relation to the formation and changes of beliefs. Belief is defined as *an individual's generalizations from the mental construction of the experience, based on evaluation and judgment, thus are predisposed to actions*. Based on the definition, the analysis of the units, the mental constructs, perceptions, attitudes and behaviors were further identified, so as to demonstrate the relationship and differentiate the effects with beliefs. Perception was defined as learners' own sensory input about the environment and the events, which were subjective memories recalled, analyzed or interpreted from the

experiences. Attitude was the learners' evaluation of certain objects, based on their own goals or expectation. Behavior was the actions the learners took, including the resources they drew upon and the strategies they adopted, based on their own previous successful experience, observation or acquired from more knowledgeable parties. Belief serves not only the guiding principle, or filters, for the acquiring of the three constructs. Some beliefs would be also changed due to the conflicting experiences.

The framework of belief, and the differentiation of each construct helped we delve into what the learners interpreted as the contexts of learning, which is their perception. In Chapter 4, the participants saw the *gaokao* as the controlling force on all the teaching and learning practices. Their perceived context, was not merely English classroom, but the larger environment under influence of the educational system. Their perception of the English learning process can be seen as a specific type of literacy development shaped by the entrance exam of Chinese higher education, *gaokao*. The influence is far-reaching and long-lasting:

High-stakes testing, high educational expectations from parents, traditional values, and teaching practices that make comparisons transparent (e.g., test scores or rankings made public to all teachers and/or students) contribute to a competitive school environment in China, even in middle schools (Townsend & Zawacki, 2013, p. 103).

This study resonated with the observation that how the cultural influences on the belief students carried with them to the new context of learning identified by the framework. It is also useful in eliciting the learners' own mental constructed world of their learning and the reasons behind their attitudes and behaviors. While expressing their disfavor toward the exam-oriented pedagogies, they also believed the test-taking strategies and memorization of the test content as the most effective or economic

approach. Their attitudes were mixed with the disfavor of the one-way instillation of teacher's lecturing, and the memorization as the only learning approach. The participants in this study have developed their own evaluation of the value and the limitation of the *gaokao*-driven learning environment. On one hand, they acknowledged this is the most economic or effective approach to preparing exams; on the other, they wanted to escape the larger educational system by opting of studying abroad. In the explanations of their motivation, many of them mentioned their parents, people, or even the whole society as the resources of instilling them the ideas of western education. Among various factors identified, the cultural influences have been recognized to play an importance role in instilling certain concepts about learning. In Cortazzi and Jin' (1996) definition of beliefs, *culture of learning*, "[t]he cultural aspects of teaching and learning; what people believe about 'normal' and 'good' learning activities and processes, where such beliefs have a cultural origin" (p. 230). Barcelos (1995, cited in Barcelos, 2003, p. 9) investigated beliefs using the term *culture of learning languages* and concluded that,

This knowledge, according to learners' age and social economic level, is based upon their previous educational experience, previous (and present) readings about language learning and contact with other people like family, friends, relatives, teachers, and so forth (p. 40).

The results in this study provided more discussion on how the students made connection between what factors, both external and internal, existed at certain stages and how those factors influenced their attitudes and decisions making.

This framework help revealed the underlying factors affect their attitudes and behaviors across various contexts and the changes of their beliefs. For example, in Chapter 4, the finding showed that the different the courses or programs the Chinses

students have taken before including *gaokao*, TOEFL preparation courses, or IEP, have strengthen them the ideas of the linguistic abilities and grammar knowledge overweight other skills. The use of formulaic, decontextualized assignments required the students to demonstrate their master of language skills rather than the use of writing to aid learning. Many students perceived that both two programs provided similar instructions, and for similar purposes—preparing them for the readiness for studying in the U.S. institutions. Their original belief in the significance of English proficiency and the knowledge about grammar and vocabulary affected their attitudes toward the importance of IEP. Under the different contexts they constructed, the students started to approach language learning and writing using various strategies to overcome new challenges. In Chapter 5, two types of beliefs were identified from the students’ experience in FYC classrooms—language development and composition learning. The first belief was formed by their new exposure to process-based writing pedagogy, including drafting, revising, receiving feedback, discussion. They based on their previous belief of “practice makes perfect” and developed their strategies of negotiating their performance to compensate the grades of writing. In addition, while the students noticed the requirements of their own ideas, as Leki (1992) observed, “like most language learners, ESL students are unlikely to have had much more experience with writing in English beyond doing grammar exercises, writing answers to questions, and producing occasional paragraphs as a test of grammatical mastery more than as a means of consolidating knowledge or expressing opinion (p. 30). This could explain why the students have another belief about language learning, viewing grammar and vocabulary as the key quality to improve in writing courses. This framework is also useful in terms of showing the conflicting concepts in the

students' mind and how they reacted to the new challenges based on the original beliefs, or create different ones.

One of the most importance contributions of this paper is the development of an analytical framework of belief, to extrapolate the underlying principles influencing L2 writers' overall experience. This paper offers different perspectives on how students connect their past experiences, interpretation of the challenges of the new contexts, and the resources they draw on or the strategies they adopt, the causal relationship they established and manifested in their writing beliefs. It should be reminded that, the beliefs discovered in this study are specific in terms of time and contexts, and should be regarded as temporary in nature. It is possible that learners would place different weights on different beliefs when contexts changed.

### **Discussion of L2 Writers' Beliefs and Implications for Research and Pedagogy**

In this section, I highlight some of the findings of the participants' perceptions, attitudes and behaviors in FYC classrooms as well as the influences of contextual and cultural factors in relation to the beliefs. I draw on these findings to make implications for future research and L2 writing pedagogy. I also suggest ways changing learners' beliefs to become productive ones into classroom teaching.

### **Research Implication for Studies of Writing Beliefs**

The results of this specific case show how existing belief influences what being noticed, valued, and acted upon in a particular environment. As it has been generally acknowledged that of central importance to this discussion is the students' perceptions of

texts and practices, and what they highlighted in their accounts (Morton *et al.*, 2011, p. 8). This framework provides a finer analysis of the possible connections between learners' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors beyond the surface concerns, toward a deeper understanding of learners' mind. The beliefs being identified through this model should be viewed as ones that are stronger in affecting learners' behaviors as well as outcomes at the contexts or stages they were situated in. When teachers or researchers see the divergent opinions or actions from learners, beliefs should be addressed firstly to break the self-filling chain.

This framework provides a systematic way of examining continuous experience the students accumulated over time. Some of the students may hold conflicting beliefs or unsettling perceptions, attitudes and behaviors. These could shed light to how students construct their immediate environment and how they reacted to the new challenges. We can see that the students opted for an educational system, in their understanding, providing better learning opportunity. However, they held rather negative toward the seemingly "open-ended" approach or watery content in FYC classroom, overlooking other aspects of knowledge, such as process, critical thinking and rhetorical knowledge as stipulated in WPA Outcome Statement. The convention, for the L2 writers, is a huge hurdle they need to overcome because of the ideas or arguments they intend to express. The writing process and various resources such as writing center or peer review sessions for the students were viewed as checkpoints to meet, or the opportunities to obtain extra credits. This mindset might partially come from their lack of confidence in the master of the language, and unfamiliarity with the essence of "process" denotes—to conceptualize, develop and finalize projects. The procedure of reading, drafting, reviewing, rewriting

and editing for them is tedious work, but again reflect their belief of effort making nature of writing. These beliefs or interpretation could help teachers and researchers understand how other factors may play a role influencing their classroom behaviors or writing performance.

Moreover, while some students perceived the learning of test-strategy learning and memorization as limited in their overall language proficiency development and daily communication, they still expressed their belief in the importance of memorizing or expanding the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. This may seem contradictory but can also be seen as their changing beliefs, which may reflect Wang's (2013) observation that,

Both Chinese students and teachers see memorization and understanding as “interlocking processes, complementary to each other” and achieved with “considerable mental effort” rather than “a process of sudden insight” (p. 408). Wang calls this belief “effortful learning/kuxin [苦行],” or the idea that “painstaking effort” is required for all learning. This “inherited” belief goes along with two others—“reflective learning/ yong xin [用心],” which requires “emotional and intellectual commitment” and “humble learning/xu xin [虚心],” which emphasizes “learning from others with modesty and humility” (p. 410-13). Yet “humble learning,” as we see from so much of the literature on Asian students’ writing, often seems in direct opposition to our Western conceptions of critical thinking and the need for students to learn to generate original arguments. (cited in Townsend & Zawacki, 2013, p. 104).

These findings can shed light to our understanding of students’ learning beliefs and the relationship among their attitudes and behaviors.

### **Pedagogical Implication for Composition and Language Learning**

Based on the belief framework, the findings show that the students perceived the FYC instruction as the process-oriented. They described the whole process as just making texts longer by making multiple revision, receiving teacher’s feedback and peer review,



as well as visiting writing centers. Most of them mentioned the major challenge as running out of the ideas, and adding dialogues was one of the strategy they learned from the teacher or came up by themselves. In addition to the length, many students thought the requirement of presenting their own ideas or arguments as the distinguishing feature from their past writing experience. However, many students perceived the teachers' instruction on brainstorming or idea generation as "watery" or merely "story" telling, instead of the relevance between the thinking and their writing process. One student mentioned the use of heuristic, but expressed the uncertainty of the purpose and the ways of using the questions to inform their writing. Some students relied on teacher's feedback, while one student has viewed the guidance as "individual taste," similar to Leki's (2000) study that the student saw teacher's assigning work and requirements "indecipherable and entirely arbitrary" (p. 25).

To address this concern, the teacher can discuss the rationales and expectation from the projects, and the rhetorical situations appropriate for the assignments. The students can also attach the cover letter along with the submission of the writing to explain why they chose to take certain rhetorical moves and for what purposes. In addition, many students still saw this as a language course help them maintain their English writing proficiency, and thus pay considerable attention to their language use. Discussions of the beliefs at the beginning of the course to set the tone for instruction and the behavior expected and why. The most salient of the findings are the students' concerns over the role of grammar and vocabulary. Their perceptions of teacher's not explaining too much about composition writing, or if so, the instruction was similar to what they have learned before.

In this way, the teacher would be able to make explicit why he or she is adopting certain pedagogies for what purposes. The teacher can also encourage the students to express and explain what they believe about writing and language learning. If there are different or conflicting ideas or opinions, this serves a good opportunity clarifying the intentions. Reflection writing is still another pedagogy can be administered to facilitate communication and students' own examinations of their own thinking and experience. As Dewey argues that when we reflect we examine prior beliefs and assumptions and their implications. Reflection is an intentional action. A "demand for a solution of a perplexity is the steady, guiding factor in the entire process of reflection" (Dewey, 1933, p. 14). Dewey adds the function of reflective thought is, therefore, to transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled, harmonious. (1933, p. 100) Reflection starts with discomfort during an experience and leads a person to a balanced state. It takes time and focus to reach clarity of thought. Dewey writes that reflection "gives an individual an increased power of control" (Dewey, 1933, p. 21). It "emancipates us from merely impulsive and merely routine activity...It converts action that is merely appetitive, blind and impulsive into intelligent action" (1933, p. 17). It is not enough just to have an experience. Reflection directs that experience to learning and deeper insight.

### **Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study has some limitations, which can be addressed in the future research. First, this study examined twenty-two Chinese participants, with the aim of demonstrating the relationship between belief and the constructs of perceptions, attitudes

and behaviors. Future research can include more data, such as classroom observation, learning logs and interviews with their writing teachers to gain further insights of beliefs held by different parties and from different angles. Second, the study took place at a specific institution, and would probably reflect specific types of beliefs formed at certain point of time. The future research directions can include the comparison of different programs or institutions to investigate the role of disciplinary influence. The relationship between learners and their situated context in this perspective should be considered as learners' own interpretation, which is related to the extent of their contribution. Norton and Toohey (2001) also see learners as "situated in specific, historical and cultural contexts" and they may "resist or accept the positions these contexts offer them" (p. 310). The conceptualizations are interwoven with learners' feelings and attitudes. Riley (1994) reminds that researchers should "look at the learning conditions in which learners find themselves" (p. 141). From the ecological perspective, Tudor (2003) also calls for research, which 'involves exploring the deep script of human interaction with the learning process, not in isolation, but within the broader context of students' concerns, attitudes and perceptions (p. 10).' In short, the effectiveness of learning and teaching process requires thorough understanding of learners' own conceptualization of the contexts, in which the certain beliefs are at play influencing the outcomes. The future research can focus on exploring individual learners and obtain closer investigation of how they construction of their learning experiences in relation to their beliefs.

The beliefs identified in research site of this study, First Year Composition, also contributed to the knowledge in L2 writing field. This is the stage when most of the L2 students are exposed to approaches of learning writing based on different theoretical

assumptions. As Silva (1992) noted that, “a discipline's theoretical mood swings may not necessarily reflect or coincide with the priorities of the individuals it serves” (p. 43). Viewing beliefs as dynamic, social-constructed and changeable (Ruiz, 2009), teachers should incorporate explicit discussion of the beliefs and their relationship between learning writing, and develop pedagogies facilitating critical self-reflection. As Barcelos and Kajaras (2011, p. 282) reminded, “beliefs are also seen as increasingly complex, fluctuating, appropriated and related to affordances” (p. 282). Context is seen not as a static concept, a reflection for social interaction, but a “socially constructed, interactively sustained, time-bound phenomenon” where “each additional arena for subsequent interaction modifies the existing context while creating a new arena for subsequent interaction” (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992, pp. 5-6). Further research can be done to trace students’ learning experience across disciplines and years to understanding how and to what extent their beliefs remain or change.

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APPENDIX A  
IRB APPROVAL

**To:** Paul Matsuda  
LL

**From:** Mark Roosa, Chair *MR*  
Soc Beh IRB

**Date:** 11/05/2012

**Committee Action:** Exemption Granted

**IRB Action Date:** 11/05/2012

**IRB Protocol #:** 1210008470

**Study Title:** Chinese speakers' university writing experiences

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(1) (2) .

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER (CHINESE)

\_\_\_\_同学您好

我们正在进行一项研究，目的在于了解亚利桑那州立大学生的英文写作学习经验。本研究将由英文系教授 Paul Kei Matsuda 指导下的项目研究组完成：Juval Racelis, 刘佳宁、夏静、吴黛敏与杨雨芹。我们希望您能参加我们的中文采访部分。在您同意的情况下，本研究小组成员将会跟您联系，约定采访时间地点。

如果您已满 18 岁或以上，我们诚挚邀请您参与此项研究计划。访谈时间约为一小时（如有需要，会安排后续访谈），访谈内容主要在于了解您在英语写作课程（WAC 107, ENG 101, ENG 107）的学习经历。我們也可能邀請您分享您在這門寫作課中完成的其中一篇寫作作業。对于访谈中的任何问题，您都可以选择是否回答。您也可以选择随时中止访谈。本项研究结果可能会以研究报告、会议、论文及其他方式发表，但您的姓名以及所有相关个人信息都会被删除。

参加本研究完全基于您的个人意愿。本研究不会引起您的任何不适或给您带来任何风险。如果您选择不参加本研究或在参加研究后的任何时候希望退出本研究，都不会给您的学业或成绩带来任何影响。您在采访中的回答将完全保密。访谈内容绝对不会透露给任何一个研究者之外的人。

采访过程将被录音。录音将会在得到您允许之后开始。在访谈过程中，一旦您觉得某处谈话不愿被记录，请随时告知采访您的研究者。在访谈过程中或访谈结束后，如果您希望更改您的回答，也请随时告知采访您的研究人员。我们将尊重您的选择。所有采访数据将会被保存在密码锁定的电脑文件夹中。在本研究发表后的一年内，访谈内容将会被删除。

如果您对本研究有任何疑问，请联系这些人员中任何一位：刘佳宁：Jianing.Liu.2@asu.edu, 夏静：Jing.Xia.1@asu.edu, 吴黛敏：Tai-Min.Wu@asu.edu, 杨雨芹：Yuching.Yang@asu.edu。如果您对参加本研究应该享受的权利存在疑惑，或担心本研究会给您带来任何危险，请联系亚利桑那州立大学研究协会(Research Integrity and Assurance) 自然人研究对象权益保障协会 (Human Subjects Institutional Review Board)主席：(480)965-6788。如果您对本研究感兴趣，请用电子邮件发给我们。回复本邀请函将视作您同意参加本研究。

十分感谢您的时间和帮助！

Paul Kei Matsuda  
Juval Racelis  
刘佳宁  
夏静  
吴黛敏  
杨雨芹  
亚利桑那州立大学英文系

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER (ENGLISH)

Dear (student name),

We are conducting a research study to investigate students' experiences through interviewing students and teachers in English writing courses at ASU. The interviews will be scheduled and conducted by a research team, Juval Racelis, Jianing Liu, Jing Xia, Taimin Wu, Yuching Jill Yang, under the direction of Professor Paul Kei Matsuda in the Department of English.

If you are 18 years of age or older, we are inviting your participation, which will involve asking you to participate in one 1-hour interview (with a possible follow-up interview) in which you will be asked about your experience learning English writing in the class (WAC 107, ENG 101, ENG 107). You may also be asked to share a writing assignment that you have done for your English writing class. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop the interview at any time. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name and personal identification information will be removed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty pertaining to your grades. Your interview response will not be shared with anyone but the researchers.

I would like to audiotape this interview. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be taped; you can also change your mind after the interview starts—just let the interviewer know. Data will be stored on password-protected computers and in locked file cabinets. The data will be deleted within a year of publication of the findings from this research.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact Jianing Liu, [jliu77@asu.edu](mailto:jliu77@asu.edu), Jing Xia, [Jing.Xia.1@asu.edu](mailto:Jing.Xia.1@asu.edu), Tai-Min Wu, [Tai-Min.Wu@asu.edu](mailto:Tai-Min.Wu@asu.edu), and Yuching Yang, [Yuching.Yang@asu.edu](mailto:Yuching.Yang@asu.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. If you are interested in participating in this study, please reply to this email. Return of this invitation will be considered your consent to participate in this study.

Thank you in advance for your time and help with this study.

Paul Kei Matsuda  
Juval Racelis  
Jianing Liu  
Jing Xia  
Taimin Wu  
Yuching Jill Yang  
Arizona State University



APPENDIX D

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

## Chinese Students' Experience in First Year Writing Classrooms

We are conducting a research study to investigate students' experiences through interviewing students and teachers in English writing courses at ASU. The interviews will be scheduled and conducted by a research team, Juval Racelis, Jianing Liu, Jing Xia, Taimin Wu, Yuching Jill Yang, under the direction of Professor Paul Kei Matsuda in the Department of English.

We are inviting your participation, which will involve asking you to participate in one 50-minute interview in which you will be asked about your experience learning English writing in the First Year writing classrooms. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name and personal identification information will be removed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty pertaining to your grades. Your interview response will not be shared with anyone but the researchers. We will provide a \$10 gift card as a small compensation for your interest and time.

We would like to audiotape this interview. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be taped; you can also change your mind after the interview starts—just let the interviewer know. Data will be stored on password-protected computers and in locked file cabinets. The data will be deleted within a year of publication of the findings from this research.

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please fill in the following blanks:

First name (Pinyin): \_\_\_\_\_  
Last name (Pinyin): \_\_\_\_\_  
Home city (Hanzi): \_\_\_\_\_  
Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you in advance for your time and help with this study.

Paul Kei Matsuda  
Juval Racelis  
Jianing Liu  
Jing Xia  
Taimin Wu  
Yuching Jill Yang

APPENDIX E  
BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE (CHINESE)

出生年份: \_\_\_\_\_

性别: 男\_\_ 女\_\_

出生地: \_\_\_\_\_

已学英文的时间(年): \_\_\_\_\_

哪一年到的美国? \_\_\_\_\_

哪一年到的 ASU? \_\_\_\_\_

如何申请的 ASU?

a. 自己申请\_\_\_\_\_

b. 请留学中帮助申请\_\_\_\_\_

如果你使用了留学中介, 请指出是哪家? \_\_\_\_\_

请选择你从中介那里得到了哪些帮助?

\_\_\_ 考试准备 \_\_\_ 选择学校 \_\_\_ 准备申请材料

\_\_\_ 填写申请材料 \_\_\_ 邮寄申请材料

\_\_\_ 其它, 请具体说明 \_\_\_\_\_

9. 考试准备和成绩:

a. 你有没有参加语言考试补习班?

\_\_\_ 基本的英语学习补习班(不包含高中必修英语课程)

\_\_\_ TOEFL 考试辅导补习班

\_\_\_ IELTS 考试辅导补习班

\_\_\_ PTEA 考试辅导补习班

\_\_\_ ACCUPLACER 考试辅导补习班

\_\_\_ 其它, 请具体说明 \_\_\_\_\_

b. 考试成绩:

TOEFL iBT \_\_\_ CBT \_\_\_ PBT \_\_\_ (听\_\_\_ 说\_\_\_ 读\_\_\_ 写\_\_\_)

IELTS \_\_\_ (听\_\_\_ 说\_\_\_ 读\_\_\_ 写\_\_\_)

PTEA \_\_\_ (听\_\_\_ 说\_\_\_ 读\_\_\_ 写\_\_\_)

ACCUPLACER \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ 我申请到条件式入学, 语言能力测验成绩由ASU的AECF豁免

\_\_\_ 我没有任何考试成绩, 直接就读ASU的AECF

\_\_\_ 其它其他考试(请具体说明) \_\_\_\_\_

10. 学位类别: 交换学生 \_\_\_ 本科学位 \_\_\_ 资格证书 \_\_\_ 其它 \_\_\_\_\_

11. 所学专业: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX F  
BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE (ENGLISH)

1. Year of birth: \_\_\_\_\_
  2. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_
  3. City of birth: \_\_\_\_\_
  4. How many years have you been learning English? \_\_\_\_\_
  5. When did you come to the United States? \_\_\_\_\_
  6. When did you come to the current university? \_\_\_\_\_
  7. How did you apply to the current university?
    - a. I applied on my own \_\_\_\_\_
    - b. I applied through a study-abroad agency \_\_\_\_\_
      - i. Please indicate which agency you used \_\_\_\_\_
      - ii. Please select in which of the following ways the agency helped you (Check all that apply)
        - \_\_\_ Prepare for the tests
        - \_\_\_ Decide which university to apply
        - \_\_\_ Prepare the application materials
        - \_\_\_ Fill out application forms
        - \_\_\_ Mail out the application materials
        - \_\_\_ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
- 
8. Language test preparation and scores
  - a. Did you take any test preparation courses in order to apply to the current university? If yes, please check all that apply
    - \_\_\_ General English language courses (not including required courses in high school)
    - \_\_\_ SAT Preparation courses
    - \_\_\_ TOEFL Preparation courses
    - \_\_\_ IELTS Preparation courses
    - \_\_\_ PTEA Preparation courses
    - \_\_\_ ACCUPLACER Preparation courses
    - \_\_\_ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_)
  - b. Test scores:
    - TOEFL iBT\_\_ CBT\_\_ PBT\_\_ (Listening \_\_ Speaking \_\_ Reading \_\_ Writing \_\_\_\_)
    - IELTS \_\_\_\_\_ (Listening \_\_ Speaking \_\_\_\_ Reading \_\_ Writing \_\_\_\_)
    - PTEA \_\_\_\_\_ (Listening \_\_ Speaking \_\_\_\_ Reading \_\_ Writing \_\_\_\_)
    - ACCUPLACER\_\_
    - \_\_\_ I got a conditional admission and have proficiency test waived through the IEP
    - \_\_\_ I do not have a test score. I attended the IEP at the current university
    - Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- 
9. Which degree/certificate program are you in?
 

(Please check ONE from the following options)

  - \_\_\_ Undergraduate at current university
  - \_\_\_ Exchange program
  - \_\_\_ Certificate program

\_\_\_ Other (Please specify \_\_\_\_\_)

10. Major: \_\_\_\_\_



APPENDIX G  
INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STUDENTS (CHINESE)

1. 你为什么会选择来美国呢?
2. 你为什么会选择来 ASU 呢?
3. 可以告诉我你申请 ASU 的经过吗?
4. 如果使用了留学中介, 能聊聊你使用中介的过程吗?
5. 在 ASU 读书读得如何?
6. 你以前在中国是如何锻炼自己的英语听、说、读、写能力呢?
7. 你会怎样评价自己目前的英语听、说、读、写能力呢?
8. 你对这门课的总体印象怎么样?
9. 你修这门课时觉得最困难的地方在哪里?
10. 你觉得这门课对你帮助最大的地方在哪里?
11. 这门课跟你以前在中国所学英文课程有什么相同和不同?
12. 你觉得这门写作课和你在 ASU 修的其他的课有什么相同和不同?
13. 你与这位写作老师互动得怎样?
14. 这位老师和你在中国的英文老师有什么相同和不同?
15. 这位老师跟你在 ASU 其他课的老师有什么相同和不同?
16. 你在这门课的学习过程中, 你有印象特别深的跟老师的一次互动经历吗?
17. 在你选择的这次写作任务中, 可以给我谈谈你从始至终的具体的写作过程吗?
18. 在这次写作任务中, 你有觉得有一些特别有意思的经历吗?
19. 在这次写作任务中, 你有碰到一些觉得特别难处理的问题吗?
20. 在这次写作任务中, 你跟你的老师有什么口头或书面的互动吗?
21. 在这次写作任务中, 你跟你的同学有什么口头或书面的互动吗?
22. 根据你目前的英文程度, 你认为这门写作课对你而言合适吗?
23. 有没有其他关于你自己, 这位老师, 或是这门课的想法, 想要补充?

APPENDIX H  
INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STUDENTS (ENGLISH)

1. Could you tell me why you chose to come to the United States?
2. Could you tell me why you chose to apply to the current university?
3. Could you tell me about the process of applying to the current university?
4. If you used a study-abroad agency, what was your experience in working with them?
5. What is your overall experience as a student at the current university?
6. How did you practice your English language proficiency in China, including listening, speaking, reading and writing skills?
7. How would you assess your current English language proficiency, including listening, speaking, reading and writing skills?
8. What is your overall impression of this writing course (FYC 99, 100, 101)?
9. Could you tell me what you find most challenging in this course?
10. Could you tell me what you find most helpful in this course?
11. How would you compare this course (FYC 99, 100, 101) with other courses you took when you were in China?
12. How would you compare this course (FYC 99, 100, 101) with other courses you are currently taking here at the current university?
13. What is your overall experience with your current writing teacher?
14. How would you compare this teacher with the English teachers you had when you were in China?
15. How would you compare this teacher with the teachers in other courses here at the current university?
16. Can you describe one major interaction you have had with this teacher?
17. Please tell me about the process of completing this writing project--from the beginning to the end.
18. What are some of the most interesting experiences you have had during the project?
19. What are some of the challenges you faced during the project?
20. Could you tell me about the interactions you had with the teacher during the project?
21. Could you tell me about the interactions you had with your classmates during the project?
22. Given your language proficiency, do you feel your current writing course is appropriate for you?
23. Is there anything else you'd like me to know about yourself, this teacher, and this writing class?

APPENDIX I

SAMPLE ENGLISH WRITING TEST OF GAOKAO

Sample questions of the English writing in 2016 Beijing Gaokao

Part 1: Listening comprehension

Part 2: Knowledge application

- First section: multiple choices
- Second section: close text

Part 3: Reading comprehension

Part 4: Written Expression (two sections in total, 35 points)

**Section 1 (15 points)**

*Assume that you are Li Hua, a junior student at Red Star junior high school. Jim, your friend in England mentioned that he is very interested in Chinese history in the mail sent to you, and asked you to introduce him one of your favorite characters in Chinese history. Please reply to Jim, including the following content:*

1. *Who is that character?*
2. *What are the main contributions of that character?*
3. *What impact does the character have on you?*

*Note:*

1. *Minimum 50 words*
2. *The opening and the closing provided in the prompt are not included in the total word count.*

*Dear Jim*

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*Yours,  
Li Hua*

**Section 2 (20 points)**

*Assume that you are Hua Li, a student of Grade three Class one at Red Star junior high school. Your classmates attended a series of school events called “Earth Day.” Please follow the order of the four pictures, and write an article titled “Actions for a Greener Earth” introducing the process of the activity for the school magazine “English Corner.”*

*Note:*

1. *Minimum 60 words*
2. *Prompt word: “Earth Day”*

