

Understanding students' approach to discipline-specificity when learning EAP writing: A case study in an Academic English for Business class

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Abstract

While the teaching of discipline-specific writing has drawn increasing attention in recent EAP writing research, much remains to be investigated regarding what constitutes teaching specificity. This study, adopting a learner-focused perspective, examines how students respond to discipline-specificity when learning in an EAP writing class and what the relationship is between learning the writing of disciplines and general academic writing. It used an in-depth qualitative approach and documented three focal students' learning trajectories of a business-specific genre – case analysis – in an Academic English for Business course at a Chinese university, drawing on data from interviews, the students' course reflections, and their multiple drafts of case analysis texts. It was found that the students grasped the genre-specific move structure and the specialized vocabulary of case analysis writing, and they also sharpened their academic skills for business study, including assessing information, applying disciplinary knowledge, and making evaluative analysis. However, the students' learning of case analysis was affected by problems regarding their general academic writing skills, including argumentation and the formality and clarity of language in the academic written register. The issues of learning discipline-specific writing in combination with disciplinary ways of knowing and doing, and the interplay between learning discipline-specific and general academic writing are discussed. Pedagogical implications for teaching specificity in EAP writing classes are also suggested.

Keywords: discipline-specific writing; EAP writing classes; genre learning; business case analysis.

Resumen

¿Cómo se aproximan los estudiantes a las convenciones discursivas de disciplinas específicas cuando aprenden escritura académica? Un estudio de caso en una clase de inglés académico de los negocios

Mientras la enseñanza de la escritura en disciplinas específicas cada vez está despertando un mayor interés en la investigación reciente sobre la escritura en inglés para fines académicos, todavía queda mucho por investigar respecto a lo que constituye la enseñanza de la especificidad de discursos pertenecientes a disciplinas concretas. Este trabajo, que adopta una perspectiva centrada en el aprendiz, examina de qué manera responden los estudiantes a la especificidad de la disciplina en cuestión cuando se están instruyendo en la escritura en inglés para fines académicos y qué relación se produce entre el aprendizaje de la escritura específicamente dirigido a disciplinas concretas y la escritura académica general. Para ello, se ha adoptado un enfoque cualitativo exhaustivo y se han documentado tres trayectorias focales en el aprendizaje de un género específico del ámbito de los negocios (los análisis de casos) en un curso de inglés académico para los negocios en una universidad china, a partir de datos obtenidos de entrevistas, reflexiones de los estudiantes del curso y de sus múltiples borradores de textos de análisis de casos. Estos datos han evidenciado que los estudiantes consiguieron identificar la estructura específica de este género y su vocabulario especializado, y que también mejoraron sus destrezas académicas para los estudios de negocios, tales como la evaluación de información, la aplicación de conocimientos propios de la disciplina o la realización de análisis valorativos. Sin embargo, el aprendizaje de las convenciones de los análisis de casos se vio afectado por problemas relacionados con las destrezas que los alumnos tenían en la escritura académica general, entre las que destacan la argumentación y la formalidad y claridad lingüísticas en el registro académico escrito. En este artículo se discute acerca de la conveniencia de que el aprendizaje de las convenciones discursivas específicas de una disciplina se produzca en combinación con formas de saber y de hacer propias de esa disciplina, así como acerca de la interacción que se produce entre el aprendizaje de la escritura académica general y el de disciplinas específicas. También se sugieren algunas implicaciones pedagógicas para la enseñanza de esa especificidad en las clases de escritura en inglés para fines académicos.

Palabras clave: escritura en disciplinas específicas, clases de escritura de inglés con fines académicos, aprendizaje de géneros, análisis de casos de negocios.

1. Introduction

In English for academic purposes (EAP) writing research, the argument for highlighting discipline-specificity has risen to prominence in the most recent decade. The scholarship of teaching discipline-specific writing emphasizes the “literacy skills which are appropriate to the purposes and understandings of particular academic and professional communities” (Hyland, 2002: 385) and maintains that addressing specificity comprises effective teaching of EAP writing (Zhu, 2004a; Gardner, 2016). Proposed approaches to discipline-specific writing pedagogy include guiding students to explore and examine specific discourse conventions in their own disciplines, exposing students to multiple academic literacies through contrasting different disciplinary experiences, engaging students in discipline-specific authentic writing tasks, and utilizing corpora of disciplinary genres as pedagogical tools (e.g., Johns, 2008; Cotos, Link, & Huffman, 2016; Gardner, 2016).

The central issue of “what constitutes teaching specificity” (Zhu, 2004a: 44) is a focus of particular interest in EAP writing research. Hyland (2002) sees specificity as situated in disciplinary communities and embedded in practices of knowledge construction and communication processes, arguing that the “ways of disciplinary texts vary not only in their content but in different appeals to background knowledge, different means of establishing truth, and different ways of engaging with readers” (p. 391). Likewise, Zhu (2004a) and Flowerdew (2016) believe that the specificity of EAP writing encompasses particular linguistic features, unique thought processes, and communicative practices associated with specific disciplines. Carter (2007) deepens insights into the relationship between discipline-specific writing and disciplinary practices from a learner-focused perspective, that is, he sees the ways of “writing” in disciplines as students’ response to disciplinary ways of “doing,” defined as four meta-genres (problem-solving, empirical inquiry, research from sources, and performance), and he argues that discipline-specific writing in this sense is critical to the ways of “knowing” in disciplines.

Carter (2007) contributes a valuable learner-focused perspective to understand what constitutes teaching specificity, but only a few studies have adopted this approach to investigation, and the understanding of teaching specificity, especially in EAP instructional context, still needs further research efforts. Hammouda (2008) demonstrates the connection between learning discipline-specific writing and the disciplinary ways of knowing and doing by tracking a geology student’s acquisition of a genre through the

construction of his disciplinary identity, which embodies specialist knowledge frames and practice. Different from Hammouda's focus on a long-term and practice-based genre acquisition in the disciplinary community of practice, Kuteeva and Negretti (2016) and Kaufhold (2017) shift attention to the learning of discipline-specific writing in EAP classes. Kuteeva and Negretti's cross-discipline study (2016: 36) shows that students' development of genre knowledge is "linked to their perception of knowledge-making practices in their respective disciplines"; similarly, Kaufhold (2017) finds that students' building genre knowledge requires connecting disciplinary studies to the interrelated epistemological, thematic and discursal aspects of academic writing. These studies touch upon the relation between discipline-specific writing and the disciplinary way of knowing, but their focus is more on genre knowledge development than on the discipline-specificity of writing, so the findings are limited concerning the interplay between writing in disciplines and the disciplinary ways of knowing and doing. It is worth continuing research efforts to explore from a learner-focused perspective what constitutes teaching specificity of academic writing in relation to disciplinary ways of knowing and doing in EAP classes.

Teaching specificity in EAP writing classes also gives prominence to the issue of the relationship between discipline-specific and general academic writing abilities in course design, but existing studies are inconclusive about the issue in EAP teaching practice. The two types of writing are now seen as "ends of a continuum" rather than as "a dichotomy": towards the "general" end are the writing skills entailed by the academic written register in general, and towards the "specific" end are those specific to writing in different disciplines (Dang, Coxhead & Webb, 2017: 961; Cai, 2016; Gardner, 2016; Hyland, 2016). Researchers suggest that general EAP writing instruction could help undergraduate students to develop a more academic writing register (Crosthwaite, 2016), which could be transferred across task types and disciplines, though with complexities concerning differences in task types and disciplines (James, 2010). Teaching discipline-specific writing does not mean excluding general academic writing skills, but how to integrate general academic writing into that instruction, an area which has had increasing attention recently, is still a problem needing further research. For example, Cai (2016) reports that the learning of general lexical bundles in academic writing relies on the learning of move-specific lexical phrases, indicating an emphasis on specific vocabulary. In contrast, Peters and

Fernández (2013: 236) find that the lexical needs of English for specific purposes (ESP) students (of architecture) are more for the “shared terminology of science disciplines and academic discourse at large” than for architectural terminology, suggesting that instruction needs to emphasize general academic vocabulary. Similarly, Lancaster’s study (2016) of both discipline-specific and general expressions of academic stance in students’ texts highlights shared rhetorical expectations for expressing a critical stance as part of a “general novice academic stance that may be implicitly expected in students’ coursework writing across a range of contexts” (Lancaster, 2016: 236).

While discipline-specificity is increasingly emphasized in teaching EAP writing, how to teach specificity in relation to disciplinary ways of knowing and doing and how to appropriately address the general requirement for the formal academic written register in instruction to better meet students’ needs for writing in disciplines are two important issues in need of further exploration. To address the two issues, the study reported here takes a learner-focused perspective and looks into students’ approach to learning a discipline-specific genre, case analysis writing, in an Academic English for Business course. It adopts an in-depth qualitative approach to documenting three focal students’ learning experiences, aiming to answer the following two research questions:

- How do the students respond to the discipline-specificity of case analysis writing when learning in an EAP class?
- What is the relationship between case analysis writing and general academic writing in the students’ learning process?

2. The business-specific genre – case analysis

Case analysis is one of the most common and important disciplinary genres in business courses that feature case-based teaching and learning (Esteban & Cañado, 2004; Nathan, 2013). As a “student coursework genre” (Gardner & Nesi, 2013: 25), case analysis assesses students’ written response to actual cases in business practice, including “[applying] business concepts, theory, and knowledge to the analysis of business problems and business decision-making processes” (Zhu, 2004b: 120); its specificity lies in the analytical, problem-solving, persuasive, rhetorical, and teamwork skills that are valued

in business studies. The definition and description of case analysis has subtle differences in different educational contexts linked with similar terms for the genre, such as case study, case report, and case critique. Gardner and Nesi (2013: 35) clarify that the “defining feature of Case Studies is the inclusion of recommendations, while [Case] Critiques include evaluation as central, and Explanations offer a more neutral explanation”. Similarly, Nathan (2013, 2016a) distinguishes between case critique, case report, and case analysis, noting specific requirements of students’ response to cases, such as analysis, evaluation, role-taking, or recommendations. Despite such differentiation, it can be seen that case analysis, as the assessed student writing intended for business study, entails students assuming dual roles: the institutional role, that is, to demonstrate their understanding of disciplinary concepts, theories, and analytical tools, and the professional role – to apply their disciplinary knowledge to actual business practice for making decisions and solving problems (Forman & Rymer, 1999; Zhu, 2004b), which is largely shaped by the typical “learning situation” – problem solving in business study (Carter, 2007: 395). Problem-oriented writing tasks are proposed for teaching case analysis writing in academic writing classes (Zhu, 2004b).

In the current study, case analysis is defined as students’ written response to case method education in business courses, entailing business-specific academic writing proficiency, the display of discipline specialist knowledge, and application of the knowledge to analysis, evaluation, and explanation of actual business practice. It is a medium-level assessed writing task for academic novices (sophomores and juniors) (Gardner & Nesi, 2013), close to case critique and case analysis classified by Nathan (2013)¹. The basic move structure, as adapted from Nathan (2016b) and Bangeni (2013), includes four major moves (with sub-moves), as shown in Figure 1. Given the dynamic conception of genre as a situated response to social exigency (Miller, 1994; Forman & Rymer, 1999), it is worth pointing out that case analysis targeted in an EAP writing class also embodies a pedagogical purpose (Forman & Rymer, 1999), that is, to familiarize students with the formal, rhetorical, and process dimensions of the genre and to prepare them for the academic skills required. In the present study, the students’ response to the discipline-specificity of case analysis is examined in terms of their understanding of the move-step structure, the use of specialized vocabulary, and the performance of case information assessment, persuasion of personal opinions, and communication with formality and clarity, which reflect the “purposes, conventions, and resources for communicating

The parallel writing part targeted the specific genre of case analysis in business study. For the writing instruction, I followed the ESP genre-based approach and placed emphasis on genre analysis and meta-communication of the move structure, rhetorical strategies, lexicogrammatical features, and communication processes. The discipline-specific skills of assessing information, making analysis, persuading audiences, and brief and concise communication were also part of the genre-based instruction (see details of the writing syllabus in Appendix A). The pedagogical purpose was to strengthen students' genre awareness, rather than imposing the genre features as prescriptive rules.

For genre-focused EAP writing practice, I utilized the step-by-step task of case analysis writing on the basis of the course reading materials (see Appendix B), following the problem-oriented writing task design (Zhu, 2004b). The writing practice consisted of three staged tasks in correspondence to the writing instruction and the students' writing procedures: (a) Shaping a case analysis – working out an outline (assigned at the end of course Session 1 and submitted in Session 4, including two to three drafts); (b) Pilot writing – writing a few paragraphs of the Analysis and Evaluation Move (assigned at the end of Session 4 and submitted in Session 7, including two drafts); and (c) Completion of the case analysis (about 1,200 words long; assigned at the end of Session 10 and submitted at the end of the semester). Students obtained teacher feedback on each assignment and had teacher assistance with the writing practice in tutorials for addressing any difficulty or problem arising in the learning process.

3.2. Participants

Three students from the class participated in the study on a voluntary basis. For ethical concerns, the study was conducted one week after the course had finished and all students were graded; I emailed the whole class (12 students) to inform them about the purpose and design of my study, and asked them to contact me within one week if they were interested to participate. Three students (Yan, Hong, and Wu, pseudonyms) replied to me and became participants in the study by signing Participant Consent Forms.

Yan (female) and Wu (female) were majors of management in their sophomore year, while Hong (male) was a junior majoring in marketing. They all intended to apply for exchange programmes of overseas universities, but had received no formal EAP writing instruction previously.

The students had an upper-intermediate level of English proficiency, as they had finished College English III (the advanced English for General Purposes course at the university) and passed the proficiency test (including reading, writing, and listening) before attending the EAP class. They were native speakers of Chinese, with English as a foreign language.

3.3. Data sources and analysis

The focal students were invited to write about their reflections on learning case analysis writing in the class. Based on their written reflections, I conducted semi-structured interviews with them for their further commentaries on the learning experiences in the EAP class. The interviews were conducted in Chinese² so as to put the students at ease and were guided by the following topics: (a) responding to the instruction of case analysis writing; (b) doing EAP writing tasks; and (c) understanding case analysis writing (see Appendix C). While these topics served as a guide to the proceedings of each interview, the participants were encouraged to mention anything they thought was relevant or important to their learning experiences. The method of discourse-based interviews was also used as part of the semi-structured interviews for seeing into the writing processes behind the students' texts and the underlying reasons for particular writing choices. The interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed verbatim afterwards. Each transcript was divided into extracts in terms of interview topics and issues, and then numbered in sequence. The focal students' written texts in the course (multiple drafts of outline, two drafts of the pilot writing, and the complete case analysis texts) (see Appendix D) were collected for examining their progress in learning case analysis writing. The written texts also complemented the students' self-reported retrospection of learning experiences from the other data sources.

The interviews and students' course reflections were analysed by the method of constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Neuman, 2011). The cyclic procedure of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding was repeated for generating the major themes common to the focal students' response to discipline-specificity in the learning process. For each participant's interview transcript, the extracts that contained information relevant to the research questions were marked and compared with sequent extracts. The marked extracts of similarities were classified and the primary analytical categories were generated from them. The primary categories of all participants' interview transcripts were then compared and analysed to generate the key

concepts common to all the participants. The key concepts were then applied to the interview transcripts to select more data that could consolidate these concepts. For example, the following three of Wu's interview extracts "I was learning 'Microeconomics' in the same semester. The textbook provided some explanation of third-degree price discrimination. I found that the knowledge matched my analysis of flight ticket pricing strategies in China Eastern Airlines" (Extract 15), and "Yes, this part explains why the price discrimination strategy can increase the profits of China Eastern Airlines, and basically the explanation was drawn from my microeconomics textbooks"(Extract 17), and "With my knowledge of microeconomics, I had no problem in understanding and applying relevant concepts" (Extract 19) were marked as similar to each other and categorized as "Drawing on disciplinary knowledge from content courses". Similar primary categories also emerged from Hong and Yan's interview data, such as "Utilizing concepts and theories in content courses" (Hong) and "Relying on readings in content courses" (Yan). The three similar categories were then shaped into a key theme "Making connection to discipline-specific content courses". The key theme was then applied to the interview data for selecting more extracts that could illustrate it. The students' course reflections were analysed in the same way.

The students' written texts were analysed both at the macro-level (move structure and genre-specific academic skills) and the micro-level (lexicogrammatical features). For the macro-level analysis, the move structure of case analysis (see Figure 1) was referred to, while the variation of the actual move structure of each student's text was assessed in the analysis as well. The correspondent academic skills required by each move, such as analytical skill and argumentation (in terms of Toulmin's model)³ required by Move 2 and 3, were also examined through the textual analysis. For the micro-level analysis, the participants' texts were examined for the use of specialized vocabulary, formality of academic writing, and clarity of conveying meaning for effective business communication, which are priorities of writing in business courses (Zhu, 2004b); the examples of those lexicogrammatical features were noted, numbered, and evaluated in analysis. The results of textual analysis and the themes from constant comparison were then integrated to answer the two research questions of this study.

4. Findings

The major themes emerging from data analysis are reported in terms of the two research questions; illustrative data are presented accordingly.

4.1. Research question 1: Students' learning response to the discipline-specificity of case analysis writing

4.1.1. Applying the move structure flexibly for specific cases

A typical learning response common to all the focal students when they were working on the outline of their case analysis (writing task 1) is that they applied the move structure flexibly for shaping their specific writing. The students worked out the outlines as required, but they reported that it was no easy job, as they needed to address the specifications of their individually focused cases before shaping the writing appropriately into a formal case analysis. Yan recalled:

I think the move structure we learned and discussed in class served as guidance on my writing. But even with the structure I still spent much time organizing my writing [Yan's focused case is Coca Cola's marketing strategy in China]. I needed to consider the connection between different parts of the case information, the flow of reasoning, and the way to organize all the parts into a whole... That was quite difficult. (Yan, interview, Extracts 7, 12).

Yan's outline follows the prototypical move structure of a case analysis, clearly marking the major moves and the key points of content.

Hong mentioned that he made adjustments to the move structure when dealing with his focused case (Coca-Cola's branding strategy in India):

Here is a change I made to the text organization: I have two parallel issues identified in Move 2 – brand positioning and brand association, so in Move 3, for each issue there are sub-moves of information assessment, applying concepts, and making evaluation. It is different from the sample move structure we discussed in class, but it fits in with my analysis. (Hong, interview, Extract 8)

In Hong's outline, the two parallel sections 2.2 (Brand positioning) and 2.3 (Brand association) display what he mentioned in the interview (see Figure 2), showing his flexible application of the move structure to his own writing situation.

Figure 2. Hong's outline of case analysis (Part 2 of Draft 2, unedited).

Similarly, Wu described the writing procedure by which she first drafted the outline according to the specifications of her focused case (price discrimination strategy by China Eastern Airlines), and then checked it with the prototypical move structure to see whether the outline included the necessary components of a case analysis (Wu, interview, Extracts 2, 3). An example of Wu's outline is illustrated in Figure 3: the "Body" part was organized around two questions of the central issue as well as the answers to the questions, which substantiated the sub-moves of applying relevant theories and evaluating the business practice.

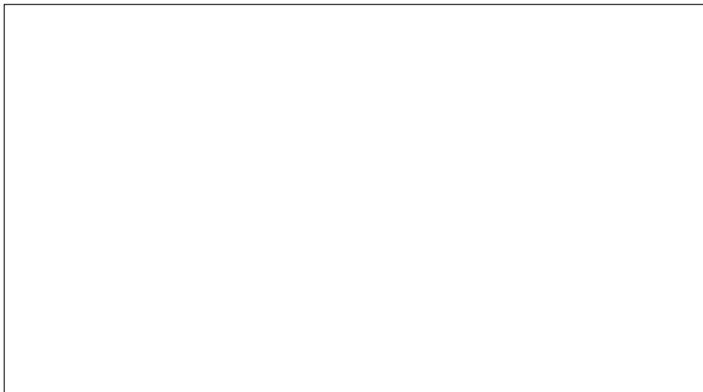


Figure 3. Wu's outline of case analysis (The "Body" part of Draft 2, unedited).

All the focal students reported that, following the outlines, it was then quite easy to complete their case analysis (writing task 3). Analysis of the students' texts shows that all the texts included the following moves: presenting case background information, identifying issues typical of focused cases,

assessing case information, making evaluation, and conclusion (see Appendix E). The students had grasped the move structure and content of a formal case analysis required by business study.

4.1.2. Making connection to discipline-specific content courses

Another salient learning action as the response to the discipline-specificity of case analysis writing is that the focal students proactively made connection to their study in disciplines, including the content courses they took and the learning resources they had, when they prepared for the subject-matter content of their case analysis, in particular, identifying issues typical of focused cases and making evaluation from initial information assessment.

Hong reported:

When I was attending this course [Academic English for Business], I was also taking a course in my school, “Enterprise Management”. I learned about branding strategies in that course, including new concepts such as brand association. I thought it would be a good idea to apply the concepts to my writing. (Hong, interview, Extract 1)

Hong also remarked in his course reflections, “It was not difficult to get suitable concepts for my case analysis... *The writing did require a knowledge base in business* [emphasis added]” (Hong, course reflections, Extract 12).

Likewise, Wu recalled:

I was learning “Microeconomics” in the same semester. The textbook provided some explanation of third-degree price discrimination. I found that the knowledge matched my analysis of flight ticket pricing strategies in China Eastern Airlines. (Wu, interview, Extract 15)

Move 2 and Move 3 in the focal students’ outlines (e.g., see Figure 2, 3) also reveal that they had defined the typical issues of focused business practice and worked out the appropriate content accordingly.

4.1.3. Emphasis on assessing case information

The focal students also attached high priority to working with information provided by case materials or collected from outside sources, a specific ability required by case analysis writing as well as business study.

Yan recalled the painstaking process of searching for and synthesizing data from the focused Coca-Cola case:

I intended to do a rigorous analysis with solid evidence. ... It took a lot of effort to get useful information. For example, I checked the annual report of Coca-Cola. The information was overwhelming, so I had to filter the data carefully and picked up the relevant data that could be used in my analysis of the Nickname Bottle marketing activity. (Yan, interview, Extracts 2, 19)

Wu also remarked on the importance of working with information in her writing process:

Writing a case analysis is not presenting my personal assumption; it depends on the assessment of relevant information about the actual business practice. Theories could be useful, but the analysis still needs to be supported by data from actual business practice. (Wu, course reflections, Extract 22)

The following account is an example of how Wu managed to obtain the data regarding the passenger load factor from the annual report of China Eastern Airlines:

To see the effect of the price discrimination strategy on the profits of China Eastern Airlines, I needed information about its passenger load factor. I spent much time looking for reliable statistics. ... I first checked the annual report in Shanghai, but didn't find any data concerning the passenger load factor, though there were data of its annual returns. Then I checked the HK report, and luckily got the statistics I needed. (Wu, interview, Extract 8)

Information assessment is also foregrounded in the students' texts of draft paragraphs (writing task 2), illustrated as follows:

... Coca-Cola's "nickname bottle" won the Grand Effie in the Greater China region in 2013. The sales data provided by Coca-Cola's financial statement of 2014 reveals that this project has boosted its sales by more than 10%. Besides, the social media interaction has reached 2.6 million person-time by September, 2014. (Yan, Pilot Writing, Draft 1)

... In addition, Coca Cola creates an advertisement "Eat cricket, sleep cricket, drink only Coca Cola" in consideration of the extreme popularity of cricket in India. Besides, one advertisement is created to commemorate Diwali which is a festival that heralds hope and instills a joy into the Indian youth. (Hong, Pilot Writing, Draft 1)

... According to China Civil Aviation Annual Report, around 90% of the total airline transport turnover is captured by four major airlines or groups ... in 2014, leaving only about ten per cent for other minor airlines. (See Figure 1) ... (Wu, Pilot Writing, Draft 1)

4.2. Research question 2: The relationship between learning case analysis writing and general academic writing

Based on the findings of students' learning response to the discipline-specificity of case analysis writing concerning Research question 1, this section presents the results that show how the students' learning of case analysis writing is interrelated to their general academic writing abilities, answering Research question 2: What is the relationship between case analysis writing and general academic writing in the students' learning process?

4.2.1. Problems with argumentation

While the students emphasized information assessment in their learning of case analysis writing, the argumentation needed to generate evaluation from the information assessment was found to be weak. For example, in Wu's pilot writing (writing task 2, Draft 1), the part that analysed the condition of adopting the price discrimination strategy by China Eastern Airlines lacked sufficient argumentation:

... [1] According to China Civil Aviation Annual Report, around 90% of total airline transport turnover is captured by four major airlines or groups [...] in 2014, leaving only about ten per cent for other minor airlines. (Figure 1) [2] Therefore, customers hardly can take flights without getting in contact with one of the major airline enterprises, and China's civil aviation market is undoubtedly an oligopoly. (Wu, Pilot Writing, Draft 1)

As Wu explained in the interview, she wrote this paragraph to show that China's civil aviation market being an oligopoly was a prerequisite for China Eastern Airlines' adoption of the price discrimination strategy. In terms of Toulmin's (1958, 2001) model of argumentation, Sentence 1 in the above extract provides Data (the dominant turnover by the four major airlines in China), and Sentence 2 is the Claim (China's civil aviation market is an oligopoly). It lacks a Warrant that being an oligopoly is the condition for the airlines' adoption of price discrimination. This part of the

argumentation was strengthened in the revised draft (Sentence 2 and 3), shown as follows:

... [1] According to China Civil Aviation Annual Report, around 90% of the total airline transport turnover is captured by four major airlines or groups [...] in 2014, leaving only about ten per cent for other minor airlines. (See Figure 1) [2] *Therefore, it is of little possibility for customers to take flights without getting in contact with one of the major airline enterprises, and China's civil aviation market is an oligopoly.* [3] *In this circumstance, the market mechanism no longer works and the major airlines are now price givers instead of price takers. Thus, it is possible for those corporations to adjust the airfares without fearing for consumer defection, which makes the conditions ripe for the practice of third-degree price discrimination* [emphasis added]. (Wu, Pilot Writing, Draft 2)

Yan had a similar problem in pilot writing (Draft 1). She made an evaluation of Coca-Cola's "nickname bottle" campaign, as the following extract shows:

In 2013, Coca-Cola's "nickname bottle" won the Grand Effie in the Greater China region, which is a great honour for a project. The business practice illustrates that Coca-Cola marketing is shifting from Consumer Impressions to Consumer Expressions. Their current core business principal [*sic*] is "Focus on the social marketing and information technology". (Yan, Pilot Writing, Draft 1)

The argument in the above excerpt fell short of Reason or Data that the Claim "Coca-Cola marketing is shifting from Consumer Impressions to Consumer Expressions" should rest on. In the revised draft, supporting evidence and exposition was added, but still needed improvement, shown as follows:

... This business practice ["nickname bottle" campaign] *empowered consumers to create their own content about Coca Cola brands and share it throughout their networks. This was an initial attempt of Consumer Expression* [emphasis added]. As Joe Tripodi, the Coca-Cola's chief commercial officer, said, Coca-Cola's marketing is shifting from Consumer Impressions to Consumer Expressions.... (Yan, Pilot Writing, Draft 2)

The problem with argumentation was still found in the students' final texts (writing task 3): Claims were made without sufficient Data or Reason. Although parts of the inadequate argumentation at the pilot writing stage had been revised with teacher feedback, the rest of Move 2 and Move 3

composed at the final stage still displayed instances of the problem. For example, the following excerpt from Wu's text (Move 3) made an analysis of the reasons why third-degree price discrimination strategy can cause profit increase:

[1] There are several reasons why the third-degree price discrimination strategy can lead to the increase of China Eastern Airlines' revenues. [2] The first reason is that it could capture consumer surplus and thus earning larger profits. [3] Separating its business consumers from leisure travellers and setting diverse prices are apparently better for all consumers than charging the same price between the lowest and the highest ones. [4] If being charged the same price, though the group of business consumers would pay less for the airfares, the group of leisure travellers may hesitate to buy the tickets or turn to other means of transportation, such as high-speed rails or trains. [5] As a result, the profits of the airline company will decrease. (Wu, case analysis, Paragraph 6)

The paragraph shows that capturing consumer surplus was one reason for profit increase. The evidence of "setting diverse prices" is provided in previous paragraphs, but more Data or Reason is necessary for reaching the Claim that the "profits of the airline company will decrease" as a result of charging all consumers the same price.

4.2.2. Struggling with formality and clarity of the use of language

All focal students reported that a major challenge in their pilot writing stage (paragraph writing) was writing in formal academic English. Wu mentioned:

I had written the case analysis in Chinese in my content courses, but had not written it in English before. This was the first time I wrote it in English, so I had to deliberately think about how to transfer those Chinese formal expressions into the English ones. *It's quite demanding, as I was not sure what words were more formal* [emphasis added]. (Wu, course reflections, Extract 10)

Yan recalled her writing process:

... the less formal words easily came into my mind, but the formal words not. I had to change those words already in my mind to the more formal ones, but sometimes I couldn't come up with good choices. (Yan, interview, Extract 24)

Hong commented, "... academic writing requires formal expressions, not the colloquial ones or the casual ones. I often reminded myself of the language requirement, *but I often felt uncertain whether the words I used were academic or not* [emphasis added]" (Hong, interview, Extract 13).

Another problem with language use at the pilot writing stage is the clarity of conveying meaning in English. The following are some instances from the students' paragraph writing that need improvement in clarity:

Many potential consumers *knew these endearing bottles through social platforms and were pushed to purchase Coca-Cola by their friends* [emphasis added]. (Yan, Pilot Writing, Draft 2)

... India is undergoing *a rapid and potential change in some aspects* like *social perception*, people's *taste to daily life*, and people's hobbies and interests *and so on* [emphasis added]. (Hong, Pilot Writing, Draft 2)

..., it is of little possibility for customers to take flights *without getting in contact with one of the major airline enterprises* (Wu, Pilot Writing, Draft 2)

As regards the final writing task (the completion of a case analysis), it was found that all the students' texts of case analysis improved in formality, but still revealed problems of clarity. One sign of the improvement in formality was the appropriate use of specialized vocabulary throughout the texts, for example:

Against the background of more different consumption demand and higher *market saturation* [emphasis added], it is urgent to ... (Yan, case analysis, Paragraph 4, Sentence 2)

... consumer *touch points* [emphasis added] have multiplied, and the old, one-size-fits-all approach has given way to *precision marketing* [emphasis added] ... (Yan, case analysis, Paragraph 11, Sentence 1)

... there lurked its branding strategies in the new *niche* [emphasis added]: Coca-Cola not only ..., regarding branding as the source of *added value* [emphasis added] ... (Hong, case analysis, Paragraph 1, Sentence 4)

Coca-Cola's successful *penetration* [emphasis added] into Indian market is mainly attributed to its *brand positioning* [emphasis added] and *brand associations* [emphasis added]. (Hong, case analysis, Paragraph 5, Sentence 1)

The reason ... is that the *fixed costs* [emphasis added] in airline businesses are high while the *marginal costs* [emphasis added] are relatively low. (Wu, case analysis, Paragraph 8, Sentence 1)

Another aspect of progress in formality is that colloquial words and expressions were seldom used in the final texts. Instead, formal expressions were intentionally used, for example:

In sum, consumer impression and data technology will *exert an increasingly important effect* [emphasis added] on branding. (Yan, case analysis, Paragraph 11, Sentence 6)

... the sales data ... *reveals* that this project *has boosted its sales* [emphasis added] by more than 10% ... (Yan, case analysis, Paragraph 9, Sentence 8)

Behind such a *formidable* [emphasis added] success, there lurked its branding strategies in the new niche: Coca-Cola not only ..., but also *adjusted branding tactics* [emphasis added] to the local conditions in India, ... (Hong, case analysis, Paragraph 1, Sentence 4)

Therefore, *it is evident that* [emphasis added] China Eastern Airlines has succeeded in ... *with regard to* [emphasis added] their preferences. (Wu, case analysis, Paragraph 5, Sentence 5)

In interviews about the final writing stage, the students, instead of reporting difficulties they encountered at the pilot writing stage, recalled their personal experiences of utilizing various language resources for improving the formality of their writing, such as the on-line corpora of formal expressions and sample sentences, dictionaries, and disciplinary textbooks in the English language.

Yan reported:

I remember that I searched for academic English expressions online. For example, I used an online Academic Phrasebank. It is useful because it provides academic phrases and sample sentences for different rhetorical functions, such as defining terms, describing quantities, and explaining causality. I can replace the informal or emotional words in my draft with formal ones from the website. (Yan, interview, Extract 10)

Hong spoke of a similar learning experience of using online language resources for improving formality in case analysis writing:

When I felt that a word seemed informal and I didn't know what the formal substitute was, I would check it on ICIBA [<http://www.iciba.com/>]. It is an online translation tool. I input a Chinese expression, and the website would provide several English words of similar meaning along with a list of sample sentences. I think it is an advantage of ICIBA to provide sample sentences,

because I can see the usage of seemingly similar words in a different context. In this way, I could decide which word I actually needed for my writing not only in relation to its meaning, but also its usage. (Hong, interview, Extract 15)

Wu referred to textbooks of the English language in her content courses for formal expressions, for example:

I found that there were relevant formal expressions in the textbook *Microeconomics* [Pindyck & Rubinfeld 2013] from my microeconomics class [English-medium instruction]. I directly borrowed some formal expressions. It helped me a lot with my writing. (Wu, interview, Extract 16)

However, the lack of clarity of presenting information and opinions, a problem emerging from the pilot writing stage, still remained in the final texts of the learners' case analysis. The three focal students all admitted that, as it was the first time they wrote a case analysis in English, they needed to frequently shape in their mind the meaning in Chinese and then translate it from Chinese to English. There were frequent vague expressions in their texts, similar to those found in their draft paragraphs, for example:

Separating its business consumers from leisure travellers [emphasis added] and setting diverse prices are apparently better for all consumers than *charging the same price between the lowest and the highest ones* [emphasis added]. (Wu, case analysis, Paragraph 6, Sentence 3)

... Coca-Cola *gained two leading actors who were shown as* [emphasis added] chatting mates in an advertisement (Hong, case analysis, Paragraph 4, Sentence 9)

... in order to *enhance the flexibility*, the company *granted consumers freedom* to custom-order a nickname bottle with their own name *in different channels* [emphasis added]. (Yan, case analysis, Paragraph 6, Sentence 1)

5. Discussion

By documenting three focal students' learning of a business-specific written genre in an EAP class, this study examined the learners' responses to the discipline-specificity of the genre and the relationship between learning discipline-specific writing and general academic writing. The students' capability of addressing the specifications to produce their own case analysis

texts (such as adjusting the move structure to fit in with their focused cases and choosing the appropriate formal words for individual writing situations) shows that they achieved not only the “knowing what” but also the “knowing how” of discipline-specific writing. An important reason for the students’ “knowing how” could be that they proactively connected writing tasks in the EAP class to their study in content courses, which reflects that they were learning the writing of disciplines through disciplinary ways of “doing” and “knowing” (Carter, 2007: 410). As shown by the findings, the focal students drew on subject-matter knowledge from their content courses and applied relevant concepts and theories to analysing the central issues of their focused cases, and they placed particular emphasis on assessing information about actual business practice. Such learning actions indicate their taking the roles of “disciplinary thinker” and “problem-solver” (Forman & Rymer, 1999: 103; Bangeni, 2013), which are required by the case method in business education. Assuming such roles and taking corresponding actions in the learning process reflect the students’ response to the discipline-specificity of business study that prioritizes the “imparting of disciplinary knowledge” and the “applied professional nature” (Bangeni, 2013: 250, 256). It suggests that learning discipline-specific writing in EAP classes can be integrated with disciplinary ways of doing and knowing, thus strengthening the empirical basis for understanding what constitutes teaching specificity in EAP writing classes.

The findings also manifest some problems in the focal students’ response to requirements for the general academic writing register, pointing to an interplay between learning discipline-specific and general academic writing in EAP classes. One problem is that the students’ ability to construct a sustained argument still needs further development. As shown by the textual analysis, the problem of lacking sufficient Data or Reason before reaching a Claim, which emerged at the pilot writing stage and was pointed out by teacher feedback, still remained in the final texts of the students’ case analysis. This problem weakened the persuasiveness of communication required by case analysis writing. It indicates that the persuasive ability highlighted in the case analysis genre specifically and the argumentation ability required by the formal academic writing register in general (Hirvela, 2017) could pose a major challenge for academic novices like the focal students in this study. Further, the two aspects appear integrated with each other in that the specific requirement of persuasion in business study rests upon the argumentation ability of logically appropriating Data, Reason,

Warrant, and Claim, and meanwhile that argumentation ability needs to be substantiated through the business-specific practice of information assessment and evaluative analysis, given that “effective argumentation is *situated*” (Johns, 2017: 80).

The interaction between learning discipline-specific and general academic writing skills is also reflected by the students’ response to the use of language. It is noted that the students mentioned no particular efforts in learning the use of specialized vocabulary in business, their final texts displaying a good use of such vocabulary. But for the use of general academic lexical phrases, the students reported deliberate efforts of using online corpora, translation tools, or textbooks from content courses as support; and they made obvious progress in formality when composing the final texts. It shows that the general vocabulary required by the formal academic written register could be more of a challenge to these undergraduate students than the use of discipline-specific terminology, which concurs with Peters and Fernández (2013). Another persistent problem of lacking clarity of expression also suggests that the focal students were probably not sufficiently proficient in the use of language required by the formal academic written register. The problem with lack of clarity in the use of language could in turn weaken the students’ ability to make brief and concise communication which is specifically required by business study (Zhu, 2004b), as seen in their texts. Given the interplay between learning discipline-specific and general academic writing, when teaching the writing of disciplines in EAP classes we need to pay due attention to students’ general academic writing skills.

6. Pedagogical implications and future research

This study has implications for teaching discipline-specificity in EAP writing classes. Writing instructors should pay more attention to the link between discipline-specific writing and disciplinary ways of doing and knowing, especially in homogeneous classes of similar disciplinary fields. For example, knowledge-construction practice in business study, such as information assessment and decision-making concerning real-life business practice, can become a part of genre analysis tasks and discussions about case analysis writing, and genre-focused writing tasks can be tailored more in line with typical learning situations in students’ disciplines, such as problem-solving,

empirical inquiry, and research from sources (Carter, 2007). While addressing discipline-specificity could be a priority of EAP writing instruction, instructors also need to consider that students' learning of specificity, especially academic novices like undergraduate students, interacts with their general academic writing abilities, as discussed above. For example, the instruction on persuasiveness required by case analysis writing could be combined with instructional frameworks of argumentation (e.g., Wingate, 2012; Pessoa, 2017). Likewise, the emphasis on disciplinary vocabulary can be expanded to academic lexical bundles that are not specialized terms but are commonly used for meaning construction in discipline-specific genres, as a way to enhance students' English proficiency of writing in disciplines. Instructors also need to help students develop learning strategies for general academic writing, such as using online corpora, translation tools, or textbooks from content courses, as reported in the study. This may more effectively help students to address the complexity of academic writing in disciplines.

Nonetheless, given the limitations of the study, its findings and pedagogical implications should be considered tentative. The data are limited to a small number of participants and a specific instructional context, and provide evidence only about the students' learning experience over a relatively short period of time. To strengthen the pedagogical potential of the findings, future studies could look into the connection between students' learning of discipline-specific writing in EAP classes and their actual academic writing practice in disciplines on a long-term basis; comparative analysis of students' approach to writing of disciplines in the two contexts can deepen the insights into teaching specificity in EAP writing classes that this study has explored.

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NOTES

¹ Case critique refers to "written case responses with primary focus on use of business theory for analysis and evaluation of strategies and actions employed by individuals or organisations within the studied business case"; and case analysis refers to "written case response in which writers analyse a case and identify key factors influencing events and actions in the case (may be closely linked to evaluative tasks)" (Nathan, 2013: 59).

² The interview extracts reported in the article were translated by a Chinese-English bilingual colleague in a similar research field.

³ As regards the use of Toulmin's (1958, 2001) model of argumentation for the analysis of case analysis writing, also see Bangeni (2013).

