

Navigating tensions in writing a master's thesis: Support from extended communities

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Following activity theory, this study investigated the tensions in completing a master's thesis and the resources to negotiate those tensions. The participants were English as an additional language (EAL) master's students enrolled in a thesis writing seminar in the TESOL program at an Anglophone university. Data included class observations, interviews with the participating students and the instructor, students' written assignments, and other relevant documents. Findings show that tensions, when effectively mediated, can serve as catalysts for students' agency. To navigate the tensions in tools, rules, and division of labour, students sought resources from the extended community to fulfil the requirements of their master's thesis in alignment with institutional guidelines and the instructor's expectations. The third layer of the extended community, students' social networks, shows that academic success is often less a product of individual merit and more a result of capital conversion, where other forms of capital can be converted into resources that help students achieve academic success. Ultimately, when writing takes place in a supportive environment, students will likely have greater confidence in academic writing and grow as academic writers.

Key Words: activity theory, activity system, tools, rules, division of labour, English as an additional language.

1. Introduction

Academic writing is a major means for students in higher education to construct knowledge and communicate information (Coffin & Donohue, 2012; French, 2020). Yet, academic writing varies across genres, disciplines, and institutional contexts, reflecting the sociocultural settings in which it is embedded. As such, it is more than a set of language skills but rather a social practice situated in sociocultural contexts (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2003; Lillis & Scott, 2007). Effective academic writing involves both content knowledge and disciplinary-specific literacy practices, as a particular academic discipline has specific practices of reading, writing, and reasoning to construct and communicate knowledge (Abasi & Graves, 2008; Hyland, 2018). To produce quality work, students need to possess knowledge in both aspects (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). Thus, academic writing can be perceived as a process of students' "disciplinary becoming" (Curry, 2016, p. 78), through which they gradually develop the knowledge and practices required to participate as members of a disciplinary community.

Writing a master's thesis is also a journey of disciplinary becoming: Students generally need to follow the literacy practices of their discipline while exercising agency to make discursive choices (Flowerdew & Wang, 2015). However, for many master's students with English as an additional language (EAL), a thesis can be the first extended text that they produce (Ylijoki, 2001). As a result, they may not have experience in writing such a genre. Additionally, students' perceptions of their identity as EAL users may hinder them from entering academic conversations (Costino & Hyon, 2007). When students view themselves primarily as EAL learners, they may not feel confident to contribute ideas, challenge existing arguments, or position themselves authoritatively in their discipline (Gennrich & Dison, 2018). Furthermore, writing a master's thesis also involves negotiating power relations with instructors and advisors (Zuo & He, 2024), including responding to their feedback (Thompson, 2005). Therefore, many EAL master's students find writing a thesis challenging: even if they have accumulated content knowledge, many still need to learn the literacy practices of Anglophone countries (Norton, 2010).

Research has documented that the process of disciplinary becoming is intricately intertwined with the sociocultural context of writing, showcasing how various contextual elements impact EAL students' writing practices (Blommaert, 2013; Park & De Costa, 2015). However, the context of writing does not always support writing, such as the different disciplinary conventions involved (He, 2020), causing tensions and conflicts. Studies have investigated the mediating effects of writing context, such as classroom instruction (e.g., Cumming et al., 2018; Wette, 2014), peer and instructor/supervisor feedback (e.g., Bankier, 2022; Li & Han, 2023; Mochizuki & Starfield, 2021), and access to resources (e.g., Blommaert, 2013). In contrast, few have examined tensions and conflicts in these contextual elements, except for Li's (2013) study and Ren and Zhu's (2023) more recent study. Both studies reported that tensions exist in the context of EAL undergraduate students' writing.

Writing a master's thesis may be very different from completing undergraduate writing assignments. For many students, a master's thesis is high-stakes as successful completion is needed to meet graduation requirements, regardless of length and genre (Bui, 2014). Additionally, EAL master's students may struggle to balance the authoritative voices of others with the demand for originality (Zhao & Liu, 2021): they are expected to produce original work to contribute to their fields while relying on existing academic literature to establish context and credibility. The identity of being master's students who have "mastered" the knowledge in their fields further intensifies that struggle. As a result, there may be tensions during the process (Hajar & Mhamed, 2021).

Existing research has extensively explored the writing process, focusing primarily on the resources that have helped undergraduate students navigate the process (e.g., Kessler, 2020; Ren & Zhu, 2023). However, scant attention has been paid to exploring the tensions in EAL master's students' thesis writing and the strategies and resources that can help navigate these tensions. Meanwhile, tensions in writing can be "springboards for understanding and spurring change" (Sagre et al., 2022, p. 162). For EAL students, these changes may mean deviating from the writing practices in their home language, adapting to English-medium academic writing conventions, and being more resourceful and strategic during the adaptation process. Therefore, this study investigated the tensions in EAL master's thesis writing and how students negotiated these tensions. The participants were seven master's students in a TESOL program from China who chose to write an extended literature review as a thesis. The overarching research questions were:

1. What were the tensions in writing a master's thesis for EAL students?
2. How did the students navigate the tensions to complete the thesis?

2. Literature review

Social practice theorists and researchers believe that writing is influenced by sociocultural contexts (Blommaert, 2005). The sociocultural context of literacy practices can include the immediate context surrounding a text, such as the writing course the text is for, and the larger context

surrounding the writing practices, such as the institutional culture (Fairclough, 2003). Since individuals cannot be separated from their social and historical backgrounds, these contexts inevitably shape their writing practices (Bazerman & Prior, 2003; Lea & Street, 2006). Examining the immediate context can reveal how writers use language to achieve certain communicative functions, such as making claims, guiding readers, and elaborating concepts (Li & Wharton, 2012). Examining the larger context, such as institutional and social culture, can reveal how writers' discursive choices are situated in and influenced by their access to various resources (Coffin & Donohue, 2012).

Increasingly, research has shown that the elements of sociocultural contexts can mediate EAL students' writing practices (e.g., Kessler, 2020). For instance, Ren and Zhu's (2023) case study reported that a Chinese undergraduate student's English writing was influenced by her home language, the sources she consulted, her cultural identity as a Chinese citizen, and her institutional identity as an undergraduate student. Kessler's (2020) study reported that two Chinese doctoral students at a university in the U.S. used technological tools to increase their knowledge of content and language development. For example, for content knowledge, they used Wikipedia and Mendeley; for language learning, they used Youdao (a Chinese-based electronic dictionary) and an English word collocation corpus. Specifically, Rahimi et al. (2025) viewed automated written corrective feedback as a "tool" in an activity system and found that it helped students achieve greater self-regulation. In sum, writing contexts, including available resources, play a critical role in EAL student writing.

However, elements in one writing context may not always contribute to students' writing in another (Yu et al., 2021) because the literacy practices in EAL students' home culture may conflict with those in Anglophone countries, resulting in tensions and conflicts. A small number of studies have recognized the tensions in undergraduate students' writing. For example, Li (2013) reported the tension between students' role as EAL novice writers versus the expectation to engage with English-medium sources written by experts. Similarly, Ren and Zhu (2023) identified the tensions between following Anglophone writing norms and EAL Chinese students' lack of access to them. Both studies focused on undergraduate students.

Writing a master's thesis may involve tensions different from those involved in undergraduate course assignments as a master's thesis serves two goals: it is both a learning process and a capstone assessment of the program (de Kleijn et al., 2012). As a learning process, it provides students with opportunities to practice the literacy practices of their discipline by reporting empirical studies or synthesizing research literature on a topic to convince readers of their ideas. As an assessment, a thesis demonstrates students' understanding of disciplinary knowledge and the ability to contribute to the field. However, EAL students' previous educational experiences and writing conventions in their home country may cause tensions during the thesis writing process. For instance, for Chinese EAL students, the traditional Chinese indirect or spiral approach to argumentation often conflicts with the linear, thesis-first structure required in the Anglophone context, which causes tensions in students' development of rhetorical structure (Jia, 2005).

However, few studies have examined the tensions involved in EAL master's students' thesis writing and how these tensions are negotiated. To address this gap, this study examined the tensions in EAL master's students' thesis writing processes and their strategies to navigate the tensions. Exploring the tensions and strategies will provide insight into EAL students' writing experiences and help writing professors and educators support EAL students.

3. Activity Theory as the theoretical framework

Activity theory (AT), originating from Vygotsky's (1962) theory of sociocultural learning and developed by Leontiev (1981), explains human behaviour in terms of its connection to the social context. From the lens of AT, literacy activities are seen not as isolated events but as interactions mediated by tools, conventions, and social structures (Engeström, 1999). Engeström (1987) further develops AT and introduces the concept of "activity system" as the unit of analysis to analyse individual activities in relation to contexts. The classic representation of an activity system (see Figure 1) includes subject, object, tools, rules, community, and division of labour: the subject is the agent who performs the activity, and the object is the "focus of the activity" or "the problem space" (Russell, 1997, p. 511) where the activity is performed. Tools refer to the artifacts used in completing the activity; rules are the standards and conventions that guide or constrain individuals' actions; the community consists of people who have the same object or "the shared purpose or motives" (Russell, 1997, p. 511); and the division of labour refers to the roles that subjects play in the system.

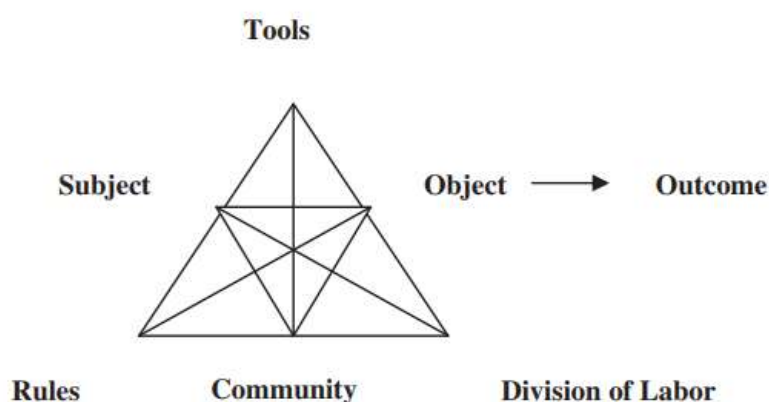


Figure 1. Elements of an Activity System. (Note: This figure is based on Engeström (1999, p. 31), showing the general core elements of an activity system.)

Specifically, Russell connects AT to the teaching and learning of writing, believing that when producing a specific genre, writers are following "typified ways" (1997, p. 513) of interacting in an activity system. Often, people in an activity system appropriate the genre using mediating tools, which can be materials, such as artifacts, or abstract semiotic systems, such as language or signs (Russell, 1997). They can choose from a wide range of tools to perform a goal-oriented action. Therefore, "tools-in-use" is the most important feature (Russell, 1997, p. 511). Learning a genre for an individual involves a process of appropriating a routinized "tool-in-use" to expand their involvement in the activity system.

Notably, an activity system constantly contains contradictions or tensions—internal conflicts within or between the components of an activity system—described by Russell (1997, p. 532) as a "double bind," where the elements of the system simultaneously constrain and enable an individual's actions. As people can live in many systems at the same time, or have historically lived in other systems, they may bring their ways of using words or doing things from one activity system into another (Russell, 1997). For instance, EAL students may bring the writing practices in their home language to their English writing, which can cause tensions.

4. Methodology

To explore the tensions involved in writing a master's thesis for EAL students, we purposefully conducted the study in the TESOL program in the school of education (hereafter referred to as

the Roseland School) at a private university (hereafter referred to as the Research University) in the U.S. The students in this program were required to write a master's thesis as the capstone work of their program, which was a literature review of about 30 pages, following the conventions of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (hereafter APA). We chose a writing class that was designed to support EAL master's students to write their theses. The thesis writing seminar met once a week for one hour. The course covered a range of topics relating to writing the thesis, including choosing a topic, searching for relevant literature, reading strategies, citation practices, synthesizing research literature, linguistic aspects such as variations in verb tenses, and revision.

We emailed the information sheet and written consent form to the instructor and students in this class. The instructor and all seven EAL master's students enrolled in a thesis writing seminar agreed to participate, and we used pseudonyms to refer to them: Rebecca was the instructor; Gabi, Joan, Maxi, Quina, Yubel, Yura, and Winston were her students.

We observed the class meetings for one semester and took field notes. We also collected students' written assignments and the instructor's teaching materials, such as the syllabus, the PowerPoint slides, the contents of the Blackboard website, and the rubrics.

We conducted two semi-structured interviews with the students and the instructor, one at the beginning of the semester and one after students had completed the thesis. The first student interviews gathered information about students' previous experiences with academic writing. The second focused on students' perspectives on specific instances of their literacy practices. The first instructor interview explored her experiences of teaching the course and her perceptions of these students' experiences with writing the thesis, while the second elicited her perspectives on students' progress. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded with consent. The second author transcribed all interviews.

Table 1. Data collection matrix.

Data Collection Method	Data Sources	Purposes
Class observations	Fieldnotes	To understand the course content, the course professor's practices, and students' engagement during class.
Two semi-structured interviews	Zoom recordings Interview transcripts	To explore students' experiences of academic writing and writing the thesis.
Collecting textual data	Participating students' written texts	To explore students' writing practices
Collecting documents	Course syllabus The instructor's PowerPoint slides Thesis rubrics Thesis guidelines	To understand whether and how relevant documents influence students' writing practices

Using the analysis software program NVivo 12, we conducted both inductive and deductive analyses to ensure analytical rigor and theoretical coherence. We first followed inductive exploratory procedures (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, we began with open coding, assigning descriptive labels to units of data. Class observations, interviews, and textual artifacts were coded separately. We then did focused coding, comparing and connecting codes to generate categories (Charmaz, 2014). We then conducted a deductive analysis grounded in Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987)

to theorize the emergent themes. Specifically, we conceptualized the whole class as an activity system and identified its core structural components: subjects, objects, tools, rules, division of labour, and the community. By foregrounding these AT components, we were able to identify the contradictions and tensions that arose within and between the elements of the activity system.

We triangulated the themes across class observations, interviews, and textual artifacts. For example, a tension related to rules emerged across multiple data sources. During class observations, several students asked questions about APA conventions. In interviews, students raised this concern, describing APA requirements as necessary for academic writing but sometimes restrictive of their individual writing styles and creativity. Their drafts also showed revisions to citation practices in response to instructor feedback. By triangulating these data, we developed a theme regarding the tension with respect to rules.

5. Tensions in a thesis writing class as an activity system

When viewed from AT, the thesis writing class fits the description of an activity system. The **subjects**, the agents who performed the activities, were the EAL master's students in this course, all from China. The **object** was to learn the literacy practices involved in writing a thesis, which was a stand-alone literature review on a topic in the field of TESOL. **Tools** encompass linguistic resources (e.g., English and Chinese), technological tools (e.g., Grammarly, Wikipedia), and textual resources (e.g., previous student papers and research articles). The **rules** were constituted by the thesis rubric designed by the instructor, the academic conventions of thesis writing, particularly the APA guidelines, and institutional expectations for academic integrity, including avoiding plagiarism. The **community** was composed of the students who took this course to complete a thesis and the instructor. The **division of labour** included participating in class activities, writing the thesis, and offering peer feedback. It also involved students' identities or roles, which included their identities as EAL students.

Through mediated interaction, the students gradually appropriated the practices of writing a thesis and achieved the object: completing a thesis following the APA referencing style, as stipulated by the course syllabus, "by the end of the course, students will have a full draft of their thesis completed" (p. 1).

Meanwhile, we identified the tensions in the thesis writing class. To map out the most salient tensions, we used the elements of the system: tools, rules, and division of labour. Specifically, tensions related to tools arise from the legality of certain technological tools and the contradictory effects of students' L1. Tensions in rules are manifested in students' attempts to follow APA guidelines while expressing frustration with their perceived constraints on creativity. Tensions in the division of labour emerge from students' positioning as EAL writers while also being expected to provide effective peer feedback.

5.1. Tensions in mediating tools

As to the mediating tools, as will be discussed in this subsection, tensions mainly manifested in legitimate tools versus tools-in-use and contradictory effects of students' L1. While writing the thesis, students relied on technological tools, their L1 (Chinese), English, writing samples, and academic journal articles as mediating tools to learn thesis writing. However, some of the technological tools applied by students were regarded as illegitimate by the instructor.

5.1.1. The legality of certain technological tools

In this study, participants reported having used Wikipedia and Grammarly to search for information and improve their writing. However, the instructor, who presented institutional authority, regarded the use of Wikipedia and Grammarly as illegitimate. Conversely, the instructor encouraged students to use referencing software, whereas students did not. Thus, tensions arose over the legitimacy of tools and the tools employed by students.

The instructor, Rebecca, mentioned several times in class that students should not use the resources on Wikipedia as the information was not reliable because “*anyone can edit it*” (Class Observations, Week 2, 5, 9). However, students reported that they had used Wikipedia to understand key concepts related to their topic (Yubel, Interview 2). Thus, even though Wikipedia was declared illegitimate by the instructor, it became the “tool-in-use” for students. Students used the illegitimate tool, Wikipedia, because it quickly provided concise and systematic information (Student Interviews). Here, the ease of obtaining information was a value that motivated students’ decisions about which tools to employ or neglect.

Similarly, Rebecca cautioned students against using Grammarly, “*After you finish writing a paragraph, read it aloud, and then you will see spelling mistakes and grammar errors. Don’t rely on Grammarly. It can’t tell the difference between ‘from’ and ‘form’*” (Class Observation, Week 9). However, students reported that they had heavily relied on Grammarly to check spelling and grammar errors and sometimes even to do the writing for them:

I didn’t feel confident about finding out my own errors. I have Grammarly on my computer. It is very convenient. When I type, it will offer suggestions before I type, like it can guess my thoughts. When I make spelling mistakes, it will give me several words for me to choose. It is very helpful. (Joan, Interview 2)

As an EAL student, Joan was not confident about her competence in identifying the errors and, therefore, relied on Grammarly to do the work.

On the other hand, the instructor encouraged students to use referencing software, highlighting its advantages:

You can download the articles, also, save them on either RefWorks or End-Note, a reference tool to save them because it can generate the reference list for you. That’s one advantage. The other thing is you won’t lose any sources. (Class Observation, Week 2)

However, the participants did not use it. As Maxi reported, “*It is too time-consuming to learn it. I can use Google Scholar and other websites to format the citations. Also, I don’t think I’ll use it in the future*” (Interview 2). According to Maxi, there are more convenient tools available than what the instructor had recommended. Indeed, technology, like Wikipedia and electronic dictionaries, has been widely acknowledged as a mediating tool for undergraduate EAL students to learn writing (e.g., Li, 2013) and even for advanced-level EAL students, such as doctoral students (e.g., Kessler, 2020).

It seems that the legality of tools does not determine their use; rather, the convenience of the tools may play a bigger role. Thus, even though the instructor had the power to decide what tools were legitimate/illegitimate, students exercised agency in deciding what tools to use. Since the process of using the tools was almost invisible to the instructor, the EAL master’s students used the declared illegitimate tools and made them tools-in-use, as they believed Wikipedia and Grammarly worked better for them. The satisfaction with technology tools, such as Grammarly, is also reported in the literature. For instance, O’Neill and Russell’s (2019) mixed-method study at an Australian university suggests that students with lower English proficiency tended to have positive attitudes toward Grammarly feedback. Fathi and Rahimi (2024) suggest that EAL students experience high levels of writing anxiety. Using an automated tool, such as Grammarly, can provide a non-judgmental space where students can fail and fix errors privately before a human ever sees their work.

5.1.2. Contradictory effects of students’ first language

Tensions also existed in the mediating effects of students’ L1 (Chinese) on their L2 (English) writing. On the one hand, they used their L1 to understand the scope of the topics, read research articles in the Chinese literature, and generate ideas for drafting their thesis. On the other hand,

they also commented that the different writing conventions in Chinese and English made thesis writing more challenging and their mediocre L1 writing proficiency negatively affected their L2 writing, as reported by the students.

In this study, the instructor and the students shared the same linguistic background; the shared linguistic background and the instructor's own experience as an international student likely contributed to a degree of empathy and understanding that informed the instructor-student dynamic. The use of their L1, Chinese, was observed by us and reported by participants as a mediating tool in helping the students learn thesis writing practices. For instance, Quina's reading notes were in Chinese; so too was Yubel's mind map. However, during the interview, Yubel felt that her L1 negatively influenced her L2 writing:

The Chinese way of writing focused more on providing background information. You know, 'pū diàn' [铺垫 translation: foreshadowing]. But when we write in English writing, we need to say the important things first. I think in Chinese and then translate it into English. This makes writing even worse.
(Interview 2)

Yubel felt that her L1 helped her generate ideas for her thesis but did not seem to improve her writing because the Chinese way of writing is different from that of English.

For EAL students completing writing tasks in English, both their L1 and L2 can mediate the writing process. Research has shown that students with stronger writing competencies in Chinese do better in English writing than those with weaker L1 writing competencies (Huang et al., 2011). However, little research has discussed the negative effect of L1 on L2 writing.

5.2. Tensions in mediating rules

Rules, "formal and explicit" or "unwritten and tacit" (Russell, 2002), include norms, conventions, and values. Disciplinary conventions, which function as the rules guiding students' citation practices, can explicitly or implicitly mediate the activities of an activity system. In this study, the master's thesis focused on topics in the field of TESOL; therefore, the APA guidelines explicitly mediated students' writing process, especially citation practices. On the one hand, students understood the importance of following the APA guidelines to complete the thesis. On the other hand, they complained about the constraints that APA guidelines had on their creativity. Thus, while these rules guided students' writing, they also created tensions.

A joke that the instructor made to the students in class, "*the APA manual is like our bible, right?*" (Class Observation, Week 8), aptly illustrates the mediating role of APA in the students' writing activities. The instructor referred to the APA manual many times in class. She reiterated that students needed to get familiar with the APA citation style, "*Check and recheck APA in-text citations and reference list*" (Week 12, Instructor's PPT Slides). The instructor's reiteration of the importance of APA guidelines helped reinforce to students the guiding power of the APA manual.

However, students commented that the APA style set constraints on their creativity, as Yura reported:

I know the importance of citations like you show respect, and you have to give the authors credit, right? But to me, the APA format and style of academic writing, it reminds me of the exams that ancient Chinese people did, bā gǔ wén [八股文 Translation: eight-section essay]. It is Western style bā gǔ wén.
(Interview 1)

"Bā gǔ wén" [Translation: Eight-section essays] was a formal essay with a strict format and rhetorical moves that had been used in China for selecting talented people for several hundred years until it was abolished in the early 1900s. The term "bā gǔ wén" has a negative connotation for being rigid and constraining creativity. By comparing the APA writing style to "bā gǔ wén," Yura meant that the APA style was very rigid and constrained her creativity in writing. According to

her, writing creatively without the constraints of APA was more enjoyable than writing a master's thesis,

I felt I had so much to say in creative writing. But when writing this, I had a lot to follow, like introduction, body section, and conclusion. I also had to write formally and cite others. I didn't like it because I couldn't write about what I knew about my topic [technology and foreign language learning]. Like everything I said I had to cite. (Interview 2)

Here, Yura complained that following the APA guidelines constrained her creativity in writing. She described academic writing as requiring her to follow a prescribed structure, write formally, and cite others. Yura believed APA conventions privilege existing knowledge, which limited her creativity.

The contribution of the disciplinary writing guidelines, such as APA, MLA, and Chicago, to intellectual activities has been widely acknowledged. In contrast, little research has reported the constraints that these guidelines have put on student writing. This study finds that APA guidelines helped students format their citations but also were reported by students to have hindered their creativity. Sword (2012) argued that disciplinary conventions "inhibit originality," quoting rhetorician Robert J. Connors, "the rhetoric of citation systems has 'silently under-girded the enterprise of Western intellectual activity'" (p. 137), indicating that these guidelines serve as gatekeepers, rather than tools to encourage creativity. Indeed, the APA-style requirement can turn prose into a parentheses-interrupted piece where the author's own voice is buried. Additionally, when a student's primary goal is not to lose points for a missing comma in a citation, they may pursue accuracy instead of originality. Therefore, how to balance learning disciplinary conventions with fostering students' creativity may need further exploration.

5.3. Tensions in the division of labour

Participants conveyed a keen aspiration to master academic writing, acknowledging the importance of feedback, given their limited exposure to academic writing and minimal instruction in the past (Student Interviews). Nevertheless, their role as EALs occasionally posed challenges in providing effective peer feedback.

A recurring activity in the class involved peer feedback sessions. Typically, Rebecca paired students to provide feedback to one another. Yet, our interviews and initial class observations revealed a lack of confidence among students in delivering constructive feedback to their peers. Instead, their feedback tended to concentrate on surface-level aspects, such as text length or the quantity of cited sources, as demonstrated in Winston's comment on his peer's proposal, "*I admired that you cited almost 10 articles; I couldn't even find so many articles*" (Class Observation, Week 4).

As a result, despite the instructor's efforts to facilitate peer feedback sessions, students did not benefit much during the first few weeks. During the interviews, students shared that they did not feel confident about offering feedback to their peers, "*I did not think I was able to offer suggestions to them [his classmates]. I do not know more than them. I'm still a learner. I'm also learning how to write. I don't think they will trust my suggestions*" (Winston, Interview 2). According to Winston, his identity as an EAL and the self-perception that he was not more knowledgeable than his peers made him feel that he was not qualified to offer constructive feedback.

In the same vein, Yura did not feel that the feedback she got from her peer was helpful:

To be honest with you, I didn't find the feedback very useful for me, because I think the feedback is about sentences, but actually my major problem is the logic, like connecting different paragraphs. One of them mentioned like repetition. But the repetitions are from different angles. That's the structure of the paper that requires you to do that. (Interview 2)

Here, Yura felt that peer feedback focused on sentences and failed to address her major concerns about logic. Even though her peer pointed out the repetition, which can be both structural and sentence-level, she did not take their feedback but defended her choice.

Studies have reported the positive mediation of peer feedback on writing development, including constructing a stronger authorial voice (e.g., Mochizuki & Starfield, 2021). However, the EAL master's students in this study lacked the confidence to provide constructive feedback to their peers, especially when they shared the same linguistic and cultural background. At the same time, they were often skeptical of their EAL peers' feedback. Given that their peers are also English learners, they often feel that peer feedback is like "the blind leading the blind" (Liu & Hansen, 2002). As a result, tensions arose when EAL students were requested to provide peer feedback: they felt ill-equipped to lead others through a process when they did not feel confident in themselves, and therefore, only provided vague suggestions or praise to avoid the risk of being wrong, which, in turn, reinforced the receiver's belief that peer feedback was not very useful.

The tensions in the system added layers of difficulty to the thesis writing process, and the resources available within the community proved insufficient to adequately support the students in mastering thesis writing practices. Consequently, students took the initiative to seek additional resources to navigate these challenges and fulfil the requirements of their master's thesis in alignment with institutional guidelines and the instructor's expectations.

6. Support from the extended communities to navigate the tensions in the system

To navigate the tensions, students used supplemental resources to achieve the object. The resources reported by students included the writing consultants internal to this graduate school, the university's education librarian, and their social networks. Over the semester, the students completed the thesis by participating in class activities and interacting with the instructor, classmates, and the others identified above.

When discussing English language learners' investment in learning English, Norton (2001) connects their learning to the "imagined community," a community desirable but not accessible to learners. We argue for the concept of "extended community" to describe the other people who were outside the activity system but helped the students understand academic writing practices outside of class meetings. Unlike Norton's (2010, 2016) studies, in which participants may never have met the members of the imagined community, the members of the extended community in this study did meet participants to support them in learning writing practices. As a result, the community may have been perceived as more immediate and attainable, providing participants with clearer models of disciplinary expectations as well as direct feedback and support. Figure 2 maps out the different layers of these communities.

As Figure 2 shows, the members of the class as a community were connected to several larger communities, linked by specific people. The instructor and writing consultants connected them to Roseland College; the librarian connected them to Research University; participants' friends and online tutors connected it to the community outside the university. Roseland College and Research University constituted the institutional context of writing, while the outside community constituted the broader social context of writing (Fairclough, 2003). Both contexts provided students with support and resources to navigate the tensions.

6.1. Extended community layer 1: Roseland College

We argue that Roseland College was the first layer of the extended community, as it was connected to the thesis writing course system by the instructor and writing consultants internal to Roseland. Beyond conventional roles, such as delivering mini-lectures and providing feedback, the instructor's translanguaging approach proved instrumental in transcending the limitations posed by the students' L1. Moreover, the mediated interactions with writing consultants not only

enhanced students' understanding of academic writing norms but also bolstered their confidence in writing.



Figure 2. The different layers of the extended communities.

6.1.1. The instructor's translanguaging approach

Specifically, in a thesis writing course in the US, where the instructor and the students shared the same L1, Chinese, the instructor played a key role in negotiating the tension between the students' L1 and the object, completing the thesis in English. In our class observations, for example, the instructor drew on a famous Chinese verse to explain what a good title looks like:

A good title shows something to grab people's attention, but it doesn't give them everything. If you put that in Chinese, it is "yóu bào pí pá bàn zhē miàn [犹抱琵琶半遮面 Translation: Like a woman holding a pipa, with half her face hidden]. That's the best title. (Class Observation, Week 3)

In this case, the instructor used the shared L1 to help students understand an effective title. Her translanguaging approach played a positive role in mediating the negative impacts of their L1 reported by students. Indeed, participants noted that the instructor's occasional use of Chinese assisted them in understanding key concepts (Students Interviews), a phenomenon supported by other research findings (e.g., Zuo & He, 2024).

6.1.2. Emotional support from writing consultants of similar background

Additionally, most students reported that they sought help from the writing center where most consultants were doctoral students whose L1 was Chinese (at the time of the study, four out of six). Rebecca recommended that students seek help from the writing consultants at the beginning of the semester, "If you do have problems, you can always talk to me. Or talk to the writing center" (Class Observation, Week 1). In interviews, several participants mentioned getting help from writing consultants at different stages of writing the thesis. For example, Maxi shared that the writing consultant helped her during the thesis writing process:

I had never written anything like this before. I made many appointments with writing support. They helped me a lot, like how to write the proposal, how to find themes, and how to cite APA. What I like most is that they understand my

problems. They were also graduate students from China. I feel very relaxed and feel very brave to ask any questions. (Interview 2)

Maxi noted that beyond the writing support, the writing consultants also provided emotional support through sharing similar experiences that they had had when they just started their doctoral program, such as being unfamiliar with the academic conventions in the U.S. and struggling with writing in English. These conversations made participating students feel they were not alone in this journey, which was especially significant to them as international students who studied in a foreign country and could not find enough support from their professors and classmates. The empathy fostered a strong bond between tutors and tutees and encouraged them to face the challenges they encountered in writing (Bankier, 2022). The emotional support beyond writing assistance provided by these consultants proved pivotal in helping students navigate the tensions in the thesis writing process.

6.2. Extended community layer 2: Specialised knowledge support from Research University

Participants also reported seeking assistance from the university's education librarian during the thesis writing process. The librarian assisted students in locating sources for their theses, thus alleviating the challenges of finding relevant sources. Additionally, she helped students adhere to the APA citation style, facilitating their navigation of APA-related tensions. With her specialisation in education, she emerged as a key resource for students in researching topics and gathering information. Her involvement extended the thesis course to the broader Research University community.

Rebecca regarded the librarian as an expert in searching for sources and using referencing software, suggesting several times that students talk to the librarian if they had difficulty finding sources and formatting citations. For example, when Winston reported that he could not find enough journal articles for his topic from the university library system, the instructor suggested reaching out to the librarian because "*they are super knowledgeable and resourceful. Things that you cannot do will be so easy for her*" (Class Observation, Week 7). In the interview, Winston reported, "*Sometimes I will seek help from the librarian. She's really helpful. She will give me a list of references she found, and that's really helpful*" (Interview 1). Thus, an academic librarian at Research University helped students negotiate the tensions around academic writing expectations by assisting them in finding relevant research literature and formatting their citations.

6.3. Extended community layer 3: Support from social networks

In addition to the mediated interactions with people at Roseland College and Research University, another layer of the extended community was students' social networks, especially "the more knowledgeable others" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86) who helped students see themselves as academic writers and peer reviewers.

As discussed earlier, a major tension in the division of labour in the class system was between students' perceived identity as EALs and their supposed identities as critical peer reviewers. However, after "the knowledgeable others" acknowledged the participants' academic competence, they felt more confident about offering critical feedback. For example, Quina mentioned:

A friend of mine [is] a Ph.D. student at Tsinghua University. We regularly shared our academic life. He helped me a lot, like sharing research articles published in China. I also shared with him the articles I found and my notes. (Interview 2)

Quina's interaction with "*the more knowledgeable others*," a doctoral student at a top university in China, greatly boosted her confidence in academic writing. When asked about how she felt about herself and about academic writing after the completion of her thesis, Quina proudly responded:

I've been interested in my topic since my undergraduate study in China. However, I was not sure about my competence in writing. After writing this thesis and sharing my idea with my friend, I feel I am very knowledgeable. I can write a lot about it. (Interview 2)

Beyond seeking help from friends, participating students also consulted paid online tutors to get help in improving their writing. As Maxi shared:

I used an app and found an online tutor. When I told them that I had some problems with my papers, they also helped me. They would read my sentences. If they find a sentence very weird, they would correct it. They would also help me correct other mistakes. (Interview 2)

The online tutors mediated Maxi's writing practices by identifying errors in her English and helping her edit her paper. Maxi's practices aligned with the instructor's expectations, which included seeking help from professional tutors and the writing centre.

The interactions with the more knowledgeable friends outside of Research University helped the students see themselves beyond the role of an EAL, as an expert on their topic or a valuable feedback giver, which improved their confidence in offering feedback to their classmates. In our later class observations, we noticed that students gradually offered more constructive feedback on their classmates' drafts. For instance, Yura offered feedback on Joan's draft, "*You need to use some studies to support this sentence so that you will sound more academic*" (Class Observation, Week 9), which Joan followed by adding a citation for the sentence in a later draft.

While technically these friends and online tutors did not belong to the thesis writing course, they comprised a valuable, if invisible, part of the social context of writing for the thesis writing students. Research has shown that the availability of these kinds of social resources can positively affect how students learn writing practices (Bankier, 2022). Unlike the first two layers of the extended communities, Roseland College and Research University, the third layer, the community outside of Research University, depended largely on students' social networks and economic resources. In Quina's case, her friend attended one of the most prestigious universities in China, Tsinghua University. Having a Ph.D. student from Tsinghua University as a friend was a social asset that not everyone could acquire. Similarly, not many students could afford the online tutoring services as Maxi did.

As Quina and Maxi's cases demonstrate, academic success is often less a product of individual merit and more a result of capital conversion (Bourdieu, 1986). Quina leverages social capital through elite institutional ties, while Maxi utilizes economic capital to access "shadow education" or "private supplementary tutoring" (Bray, 2009, p.11). Shadow education, as its name suggests, complements formal school education but can exacerbate education inequity as it is not available to all students to help them succeed. Nevertheless, both cases illustrate how individuals' other forms of capital can be converted into academic capital, that is, resources that can help them achieve academic success.

7. Discussion

When viewed from activity theory (AT), the thesis writing class formed an activity system. In this system, tension existed in tools, rules, and division of labour. To navigate the tensions, students sought resources from the extended community to fulfil the requirements of their master's thesis in alignment with institutional guidelines and the instructor's expectations. Thus, the routines of the activity system were mediated by structured in-class activities and unstructured outside-class activities. Structured learning activities were organized by the instructor and happened mainly in the class, including sharing, discussion, and feedback. Unstructured activities, such as searching for sources, reading the literature, drafting texts, seeking help, and getting additional feedback, were mediated by writing consultants, the librarian, students' friends, and online tutors who

comprised the extended community. Through mediated interaction with these elements in the system and in the extended community, the students achieved the learning outcome, that is, completing their thesis.

The findings reveal that these tensions, when effectively mediated, can serve as catalysts for students' academic development and agency. In this study, students turned to outside resources, such as writing consultants, the librarian, friends, and paid online tutors. The students also sought help from other people in their social networks, such as friends. The availability of these resources can affect how student writers learn writing practices (Bankier, 2022). Even though students have unequal access to resources, they can still make the most of institutional resources, such as the resources provided by the library and the writing centres. However, many EAL students tend to view seeking help as a sign of weakness (Marshall, 2009), so it would be beneficial for instructors to help students see that help-seeking is a form of resourcefulness.

The findings shed light on the debate over what technological tools are legitimate to help students learn writing, especially with the emergence of artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT that can generate texts. Even though the instructor had the power to decide what tools were legitimate or illegitimate, students exercised agency in deciding what tools to use, largely depending on their ease of use. As a major part of the writing process is invisible (Pecorari, 2006), it is hard for instructors to tell what technological tools students have applied. Therefore, rather than prescribing legitimate or illegitimate tools, instructors may guide students to use tools properly.

The findings also highlight the complicated roles of EAL students' L1 in English medium writing. On the one hand, EAL students' L1 can help them generate and deliver rich information more easily than using English (e.g., Gau, 2016; Kessler, 2020). On the other hand, the participants also reported their negative perception of L1's effects on their L2 writing. When students regard their first language as a limitation, they may feel insecure about writing a thesis in English, which may further affect their confidence and willingness to engage in disciplinary conversations. As a result, EAL students may resort to automatic writing evaluation tools, such as Grammarly, and generative AI, such as ChatGPT and Gemini, to polish their writing. This tendency especially pertains to the digital era where generative AI tools are easily accessible. This finding highlights the need for pedagogical approaches to address students' deficit view of their linguistic resources and support them in writing across their home language and English. It also indicates the urgency of guiding students in using these tools to assist, not replace, learning. For instance, since participating students reported having used Wikipedia, the instructor could remind students to double-check the reliability of the information with other reliable sources.

Further, students' self-perceived identity as EALs can prevent them from giving critical feedback. Offering feedback not only involves academic writing knowledge but also relates to one's identity. When EAL students are stigmatized by their English learner identity, they feel unconfident about providing constructive feedback. While research has explored the positive effects of peer feedback on students' writing (e.g., Mochizuki & Starfield, 2021), the participants did not benefit from it at the beginning. Only after they had gained confidence in their competence did they offer critical feedback that helped their peers.

When writing professors highlight the importance of following disciplinary writing conventions, the constraining effects of style guidelines also deserve more discussion. The obligation for constant attribution can transform an intellectual argument into a text fragmented by parentheses or subscript numbers (Sword, 2012). As a result, the author's own voice is subordinated to the demands of proper acknowledgment. Furthermore, when students' primary concern is procedural accuracy, such as avoiding losing points for formatting errors, their cognitive resources are diverted from creative meaning-making. The conventions discussed are not exclusive to APA style. Students' experience of these constraints may inspire professors to design writing assignments that balance writing conventions with creativity, such as research-based personal essays like a literacy narrative.

8. Conclusion

Unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on the mediating effects of classroom instruction or feedback on student writing (e.g., Cumming et al., 2018; Wette, 2014), this study extends the analysis by exploring not only the tensions inherent in producing a piece of academic writing but also the resources to overcome those tensions. It highlights how students engage with external resources—such as writing centres, librarians, and social networks—as part of their broader activity system. Indeed, Gravett and Winstone (2019) reported that support outside the class can help students not only interpret feedback but also manage their emotions. This approach provides new insights into the ways EAL students' thesis writing practices are shaped not only by their immediate instructional environment but also by their interactions with these extended communities.

The concept of extended communities reveals that the writing context is a multilayered network provided by institutions and built by students. Learning is developed not only in cognition but also through interactions situated in a supportive writing context (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, such a context was created jointly by peers, the instructor, writing consultants, a librarian, and friends. The extended communities in this study helped students negotiate the tensions in tools, rules, and division of labour. The mediated interaction helped students navigate the tension in writing a thesis and moved writing away from the individual writer to be a collective project.

This study has notable limitations. First, the master's thesis examined in this study was a stand-alone literature review rather than an empirical research thesis. Therefore, the tensions identified may not fully represent those experienced by students who must navigate research design and generate findings. Future research could examine EAL students completing empirical theses to explore whether different types of tensions emerge and how students negotiate them. Second, the study was conducted in one TESOL thesis-writing seminar at one university; thus, the findings may not be directly transferable to other disciplinary or institutional contexts. Future studies could therefore include students from different disciplines and institutions to examine how disciplinary and institutional contexts can shape the tensions.

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Declarations

1. **Competing / conflict of interests:** The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.
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Data availability statement

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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