

**Understanding the EAP writing and online learning needs of Chinese university students:  
A multiple-method needs assessment case study**

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**Abstract**

The development of educational partnerships between U.S. and Chinese universities looking to internationalize is leading to a growing demand for online English language courses for students seeking to improve their English prior to U.S. arrival. The purpose of this study was to identify the current English for Academic Purposes writing (EAPW) and online learning needs of the students from a major Chinese university. A multiple-source/-method approach to data collection was implemented. The results showed that half of the participating Chinese students were ready for basic EAPW and the other half for freshman EAPW courses. Although most of the students in the study were already exposed to (mostly passive) online learning practices, they will need to be taught interactive and collaborative online learning techniques in order to perform well in an online EAPW course. The study finds that the Chinese participants have good command over some important EAPW features, especially when these occur in familiar tasks. Overall, the study suggests that EAPW course designers do not need to overhaul their EAPW curricula, but rather shift their focus to incorporating and scaffolding culturally sensitive assignments, interaction, and technical support.

Key words: EAP, writing, online, China, ethnographic, needs assessment

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U.S. and Chinese universities are at the forefront of curricular internationalization worldwide (Obst, Kuder, & Banks, 2011, p. 13). China is the U.S.'s major partner in joint or dual degree programs. The students who participate in these programs usually begin their studies in their home country and finish on a U.S. campus with diplomas from the partnering institutions. It can be anticipated that they will be motivated to complete their required English for Academic Purposes writing (EAPW) courses online before U.S. arrival in order to focus on content courses in the U.S. Therefore, the need for developing online EAPW courses for Chinese students is growing.

The purpose of this study was to identify the EAPW and online learning needs of Chinese university students prior to designing an online EAPW course for students in dual degree programs at two major universities from the U.S. and China. The study fills in a gap in the needs assessment (NA) research related to online learning and EAPW for Chinese students, as NA studies about Chinese contexts exist (Brown, 1995; Jackson, 2004, 2005; Hu, 2007; Reid, 2001), but none are related to the emerging situation of online EAPW course development in a two-country collaboration. A present situation analysis (PSA) (Jordan, 1997) which used multiple data sources was implemented to achieve a thorough understanding of the target student population's readiness for online EAPW courses prior to offering them. The study is relevant to developers of online English courses – particularly EAPW courses – for dually enrolled Chinese students studying from their home country, and more generally to universities involved in international partnerships and online education.

### **Literature review**

Online language courses are promising for many reasons. Some concerns about higher dropout rates exist. However, retention is a function of student motivation, teacher and learner

technological preparation, linguistic proficiency, and even the immediate availability of a face-to-face alternative (Goertler, 2011). If such factors are adequately managed through training and course design, there are ultimately many reasons to continue exploring online language and writing programs. Most importantly, online language learning has similar or improved learning outcomes compared to face-to-face courses, according to Grgurovic's (2007) review of twenty-five comparison studies. Online programs facilitate cross-institutional cooperation and resource pooling (Alosh, 2001); engagement in global online communities and improved intercultural competence, as well as the development of computer and information literacy (Blake, 2007); learner access to authentic materials, the target culture, and native users of the target language (Goertler, 2011); opportunities for autonomous and critical thinking (Wildner-Bassett, 2008), interactive meaning negotiation, teacher and peer feedback, automated feedback, spontaneous and planned language production; and even curriculum articulation (Wilkinson, 2005). In particular, the teaching of writing is highly compatible with online environments, which lend themselves to intensive, extensive, and interactive writing and reading (Hirvela, 1999).

Little is known about Chinese EFL learners' preparedness for online EAPW courses. Although "[second language] writing represents the most investigated topic area" in the recent research on Web 2.0 tools in language learning (Wang & Vásquez, 2012, p. 417), few studies provide information about online EAPW for Chinese students studying remotely. In a review of distance education studies, Vorobel and Kim (2012) found only two such studies. Chen (2009) and Liou and Peng (2009) showed increased student collaboration and linguistic output in their EFL writing courses in Hong Kong and Taiwan, respectively. Liou and Peng (2009) identified positive student attitudes towards pedagogical uses of Web 2.0 technologies, and better peer-reviews and revisions after the learners received training about online peer-reviews. However,

their course with Taiwanese freshmen was not conducted entirely online, and results could have been more positive due to the face-to-face interactions and training. Hsieh and Liou (2008) and Xing et al. (2008) dealt with graduate students and a narrowly focused set of rhetorical features, and neither reported investigating learner needs prior to requiring the students to learn online. Hui et al. (2008) showed that Hong Kong students in a hybrid composition course perceived the course as being more effective when an online learning community existed and the course structure was easily comprehensible. Though positive, the existing studies are scarce and do not speak directly to the context of mainland Chinese students in undergraduate EAPW courses conducted exclusively online. To ensure the development of an online EAPW curriculum tailored to the actual needs of the contemporary Chinese student, the current study investigates Chinese learner preparedness for both online programs and EAPW.

The sections below provide a description of the study context and methodology, followed by findings and a discussion of the preparedness of the Chinese undergraduate student participants for online EAPW.

### **Context**

Recently, a partnership between the researcher's institution – a large university from the U.S. Midwest – and one from South-East China resulted in the creation of dual-degree programs. In order for the students to be better prepared for their degree program in the U.S., it was determined that they should complete online EAPW courses before coming to the U.S. The composition requirement at the U.S. institution includes a basic and a regular freshman writing course. In the basic composition course, the students (re)learn how to write paragraph types, a summary, an argumentative reader response, and process reflections. In the freshman composition course, the students learn how to write a rhetorical analysis, personal response, and

research-supported argument. The courses utilize the Sakai open-source software ([sakaiproject.org](http://sakaiproject.org)) as a Course Management System (CMS) for email, resources, classroom management, and discussions. When the partnership began, both courses were available only face-to-face (F2F), and therefore in need of modifications for online delivery.

The Chinese university regularly draws on the top 10% of the high school graduates in the province and had about 30,000 students in 2010-2011, matching in size its U.S. partner. An English proficiency exam is part of the national university admission test and a graduation requirement. The students are expected to complete three semesters of mandatory college English. During their second year, they take the nationally mandated College English Examination Band 4 (CET4). English classes meet once a week for one and a half hours. At the time of the study, there were no courses that focused exclusively on EAPW, but the skill was integrated in the required English courses alongside the other skills.

At the time of the study, the Chinese institutions' target proficiency level was defined as intermediate according to the *College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR)*. At this level, by the end of their required semesters of college English, the students should: "express, by and large, personal views on general topics" in essays "of no less than 160 words," "summarize literature in their areas," and compose "English abstracts for theses in their own specialization" (p. 4). In the U.S. EAP program, fair command of the first two skills is expected upon admission into basic EAPW, while the third is developed in the EAPW freshman course, and abstract or thesis writing are not an objective of undergraduate EAPW. As the curricular goals at the two institutions do not overlap exactly, and learning outcomes cannot be assessed based on goals statements, an investigation of learner performance was necessary before implementing changes.

Based on a mutual agreement that in-depth knowledge about the Chinese students is required, the Chinese university invited the researcher, who also administers and teaches in the U.S. EAP program, and another teaching faculty from the program, to teach a summer intensive EAPW course for English non-majors at the Chinese university, in order to pilot the U.S. curriculum and get acquainted with the institution and students. The course lasted five weeks, meeting face-to-face three times a week for three hours. The fast pace at which the collaboration began did not allow for enough time to set up the course online. The Chinese institution requested that the course be designed and conducted as it was at the U.S. university, indicating the instructors' desire to observe the curriculum and teaching techniques. The course used an interactive process-based approach, engaging the students in large and small-group discussions of readings and drafts, providing written feedback and holistic oral feedback not only on content and organization, but also on vocabulary and grammar.

### **Questions**

The following questions were posed in order to determine how prepared freshman students from the Chinese university were for satisfying their freshman writing requirement at the partnering U.S. institution by completing online EAPW courses:

1. What are the Chinese students' **online learning** abilities and needs?
2. What are the Chinese students' **EAPW** abilities and needs?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The 60 students enrolled in the summer EAPW course had just completed their first year of studies at the Chinese institution. A background survey administered on the first day of class revealed that the students were representative of the population expected to enroll in dual degree

programs with the U.S. institution. They were similar to the EAP program's typical population in that they majored in business (32%), informatics (26%), library science (10%), medicine and pharmacy (10%), environmental engineering (4%), physics (2%), and a mixture of arts and humanities (16%). Of the 40 regularly attending students whose data were used in this study, 66% were 20 years old, and 66% were female. Most of the students had begun studying English in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. About 10% had spent some time in an English-speaking country, and 30% planned to study in the U.S.

Other stakeholders provided materials and perspectives pertaining to the study questions, before and during the summer session on the Chinese campus. The Chinese administrator who provided the institutional perspective was a middle-aged male who oversaw all aspects of English teaching to non-English majors at the Chinese institution, including the curriculum, staffing, professional development, and international and online collaborations. He taught an English course per semester, usually focusing on English-speaking cultures, and – owing to the large number of students in the courses at the Chinese institution and his administrative duties – co-taught with a team of faculty. Also, twenty English faculty from the host university completed a survey on their teaching experience in EAPW and their perceptions of student needs. Ninety percent of the surveyed 20 Chinese faculty – who constituted almost the entire English teaching faculty in the department – were females between 26 and 45 years of age. Three were in the process of obtaining a PhD in English; the others held MA degrees in English language and literature. None of the teachers were specialized in teaching writing, but all had had coursework in language pedagogy and, on average, 10 years of teaching experience.

The Chinese administrator appointed a female instructor to provide information to the U.S. teachers so that they could prepare the EAPW course and understand the context and

population. She had 22 years of English teaching experience, was in her last semester of her PhD in English literature, and had studied in the U.S. for a semester during which she was exposed to EAPW theory and practice. Due to her role as an inside consultant on local needs and practices, she will be referred to as a teacher informant.

The U.S. co-instructors were two females with 12 to 15 years of experience teaching EAP, including writing and in the online environment. The researcher has a PhD in applied linguistics and oversees the EAP program at the U.S. institution. She anticipated taking on the development of the contemplated online EAPW course. Both instructors had experience teaching international students in the U.S. – Chinese students included – and both had international teaching experience. The co-instructor from the U.S. had, in the past, taught English in mainland China and Hong Kong for 10 years. She holds an MA in TESOL.

### **Data Collection**

The study is a type of NA known as a present situation analysis, or PSA (Jordan, 1997), which assesses students' strengths and weaknesses in language, skills, and experience of learning before instruction (Dudley-Evans & Saint John, 1998). In a PSA, information is collected from multiple stakeholders (students, teachers, administration, etc.), and curriculum development decisions are made after assessing the gap between the observed situation and the learning goals set by the learners and/or by the institution. For a comprehensive and reliable understanding, this PSA utilized a multiple-source/multiple-method approach to collect abundant data from which findings are extracted after triangulation (as advocated in several studies in Long, 2005).

The larger national and institutional context were first understood through documents such as the *College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR)* and email exchanges with the

administrator and teacher informant. The background information obtained from these sources was presented in the “Context” and “Participants” section of the study.

Data on student readiness for online EAPW courses came from the students themselves. A background survey on student demographics, self-perceived EAPW skills, and experience with online learning was administered on the first day of the summer session (Appendix A). In addition, writing samples illustrated the students’ level of ability in EAPW. The materials collected included an argumentative diagnostic essay written in 30 minutes on the first day of class, mid- and end-of-semester reflections, and the final essay – an argument combining rhetorical analysis and personal response. The diagnostic essay consisted of a brief summary of a text criticizing American society for its materialism and a personal reaction to the excerpt’s main idea. It was administered in order to capture the students’ abilities prior to exposure to focused EAPW instruction. The reflections provided evidence of the students’ perception of their own EAPW needs. The evolution of the students’ EAPW from the diagnostic to the final essay made it possible to predict student behavior in the future online EAPW course, and therefore make the appropriate course design decisions.

The administrator and English teachers at the Chinese institution provided an additional perspective on their students’ online and EAPW abilities, on the technological and EAPW resources and teaching practices at the Chinese institution, and the institution’s goals in EAPW and online education. Perceptions were captured via a semi-structured interview with the Chinese administrator and 14 emails with the Chinese administrator and the Chinese teacher informant. Additionally, twenty Chinese teachers completed a survey about their experience teaching EAPW (Appendix B). The U.S. co-instructors and the Chinese informant debriefed at

the end of each teaching day, reflecting on student behaviors observed in class. The researcher took field notes in the debriefing sessions.

### **Analysis**

The writing samples were rated by three U.S. co-instructors (the two who taught in China and another in the EAP program), using rating criteria normally utilized in the EAP program (Appendix C). Using the same rating criteria allowed the teachers and researcher to pilot the assessment tools with the new student population and assess its needs by using the same instrument normally implemented in the program. The assessment rubrics are typical of most U.S. EAPW courses and bear close resemblance to others used in EAPW literature, including the 6-Trait model (nwrel.org), which is a “widely used method of assessing writing in the U.S.” (Spalding et al., 2010). The criteria provide holistic guidelines for assessing how adequately the essay addresses the prompt, how coherent/cohesive it is, how well organized and supported the ideas are, and how formally correct, varied, appropriate and understandable the language is at lexical, morphological, and syntactic levels. Such criteria are known to be widely used for placement purposes as well as to grade compositions in writing courses (also see Spalding et al., 2010; Ferris & Hedgecock, 1998, p. 232-235; Hyland, 1996, p. 229-233). In addition to applying these holistic criteria, the raters made notes on the diagnostic essays indicating a strength and a weakness of each. This procedure helped concretize the holistic criteria applied and keep track of the predominant strengths and weaknesses of the population. The final essay was rated on an analytic scale to facilitate a quantitative analysis (see Table 4). The interrater reliability coefficient among the three raters was 92%.

Student and teacher surveys were analyzed quantitatively by calculating the frequency of the responses as a percentage of all the responses given to a certain question. The researcher read

the student reflections, field notes, interview transcriptions, emails, and policy documents, and extracted themes by classifying the responses and ordering them based on frequency. For the qualitative analysis, the documents from each category were compiled into a continuous document and the responses were studied for patterns which were coded and organized into categories (Maxwell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Spalding et al., 2010). For example, a statement made by the Chinese administrator that EAPW is the Chinese students' main weakness was put in the category of "student EAPW needs."

Finally, findings were identified through triangulation, which is typically employed in NAs. When triangulating, the needs analyst extracts the patterns shared among the data sources as well as the discrepancies to be considered during the course design process (see studies in Long, 2005). The sections below report findings after triangulation, singling out notable discrepancies selectively, as relevant.

## **Results**

In accordance with the study's guiding questions, results will be organized according to the two foci: online learning and EAPW, respectively. With regard to online learning, the themes extracted from the data collected using the multiple methods listed above include: student experience with online learning; student online learning practices, and perceived strengths and weaknesses; teacher experience teaching online; teacher practices in and perception of online teaching; student and teacher access to technology. The themes related to preparedness for EAPW include: student experience in EAPW; student strengths and weaknesses in EAPW from their own perspective as well as that of their teachers and administrator; and teacher training and classroom practices in EAPW. The findings related to these themes will be presented in the sections below by triangulating among the multiple data sources.

## About Online Learning

The student survey revealed that most of the students were not technological novices. 52% of the students had been using computers since primary school, 38% since middle school, and 8% since high school or university. As many as 46% of the students had taken a hybrid course in English at the university and reported using email, online assessment tools, gradebooks, course notes, and wikis/blogs in the course. Importantly, 67% were interested in taking other hybrid or online courses in English. However, only 24% had participated in frequently used online learning activities such as a synchronous online chat, and only 4% or 5% of them had video- or audio-chatted, respectively. Most of the students (60%) could not estimate how much time they spent on a computer weekly. 20% claimed they spent 7-8 hours a week on a home or campus computer for work related to their courses, but most in this group (16%) spent that time word processing, which is essential but not sufficient for an online EAPW course that would require students to navigate sites, perform research online, or communicate live. 23% of the students identified instant messaging/text chatting, word processing and email as their strongest skill (*Table 1*).

Strongest computer skills	Percentage of responses
Instant messaging/text chatting	23%
Word processing	16%
Email	16%
Downloading music	15%
Gaming	10%
Audio chat	5%
Video chat	4%
Designing web pages	4%
None	7%

*Table 1.* Student ranking of their own computer skills

Especially encouraging were the findings suggesting that a core of students had skills that extended beyond word processing and into interactive applications such as text chatting and even

gaming. This suggested that, should the future EAPW course be restricted to students with prior experience learning online, there was potential for using a variety of online applications.

Evidence of readiness for online learning as well as potentially challenging areas emerged from triangulating the student data with other data sources. Like the students, the administrator and instructors perceived that exposure to technology and access to it on and off campus were plentiful. In the words of the informant teacher, a “problem” was that the students were “not challenged by their teachers” to interact online. The administrator and 16 (80%) of the 20 surveyed teachers recognized that usually the students were expected to download resources (PowerPoint presentations, word documents, video-recorded lectures) from a course’s *Blackboard* site and study them for the final oral examination. Some indicated that using the *Blackboard* site assigned to each course was strongly recommended, as the university was on “a mission to develop online classes” in accordance with national guidelines. However, in actuality, they used the online capabilities of the course only minimally. Indeed, a course website to which the researcher was given access was rich in resources, but it was not used for email, forums, announcements, or wikis.

Challenges in the area of online communication could be predicted based on the Chinese students’ use of email. When asked to submit assignments by email, most students sent messages which contained only an attached assignment, with no subject line or body text. When the instructors requested that a paper be resubmitted, the students usually replied after the deadline. Additional evidence that future instructors of online EAPW courses should pay attention to online pragmatics came from classroom interactions. Group discussions proceeded slowly, until the instructors began designating roles. This suggested that our future online teachers should be

prepared for managing online communication and collaboration in order to create the cohesive learning community researchers advocate for (Goertler, 2011; Hui et al., 2008).

### **About EAPW Needs**

The Chinese teachers and administrator shared the perception that EAPW needs were significant at the Chinese institution, both among the students and the teachers. In the words of the teacher informant, “Chinese students have great difficulty in English writing... What Chinese students lack is not knowledge of how to write a good essay but practice. They know exactly what a good essay should be like. They respond warmly if the teacher corrects their grammar and sentence structure” (email communication, June 4, 2010). While each communication with the teacher informant and the administrator focused on a new aspect of the Chinese institution, the above theme reoccurred almost verbatim in 6 (or 42%) of the 14 emails exchanged. The only other equally prominent theme in the email communications was the need for teacher training in EAPW, related to the fact that courses focusing only on EAPW were not part of the Chinese college English curriculum. Other topics which occurred in emails and debriefings included: student expectations regarding classroom interactions, lecturing, topics, homework, and plagiarism. The emails, being primarily informational, did not yield themes that reoccurred or correlated with results from other data sources, and they will not be discussed individually.

Teaching practices were explored via a teacher survey in order to understand the EAPW pedagogies the students had been prepared for and the areas in which ability levels could be expected to be higher, so that decisions could be made later about the pedagogies to employ in the online EAPW course. 18 (90%) of the surveyed 20 teachers shared that they taught the five-paragraph or guided essay structure in order to convey that EAPW often requires explicit main ideas supported by evidence. This was in addition to other writing assignments typical of

integrated skills English courses, such as translations, text analyses, résumés and other professional writing, book and film reviews, and narratives. Overall, the Chinese students' exposure to a large variety of EAPW tasks and the attention to basic EAPW structures indicated that a broad foundation existed.

However, the students were not familiar with a number of practices which are commonly encountered in process-oriented college composition courses in the U.S., such as multiple-draft papers, detailed teacher feedback on content and organization, peer reviews, and writing conferences (see *Table 2*).

Teacher practices and wishes	Number (and percentage) of teachers who answered "yes"	Number (and percentage) of teachers who answered "no"
Teacher requires more than one draft of a paper	3 (15%)	17 (85%)
Teacher provides feedback on grammar	14 (70%)	6 (30%)
Teacher provides feedback on vocabulary	14 (70%)	6 (30%)
Teacher provides feedback on content and organization	4 (20%)	16(80%)
Teacher requires peer reviews	7 (35%)	13 (65%)
Teacher would like to require multiple drafts if possible	12 (60%)	8 (40%)
Teacher would like to provide detailed feedback on content and organization	7 (35%)	13 (65%)
Teacher would like to use peer reviews more frequently	3 (15%)	17 (85%)
Teacher would like to organize student-teacher writing conferences	3 (15%)	17 (85%)

*Table 2.* EAPW teaching practices and teacher wishes at the Chinese institution

The Chinese teachers rarely required paper drafts or peer reviews, and rarely provided comments on papers except to correct grammar and vocabulary. Large class sizes, the students' low English proficiency, and the lack of teacher experience were the reasons cited for not using these processes. It was apparent that the multi-draft, collaborative writing process implemented in the

U.S.-based EAP program was going to be mostly new to the Chinese students, and that the students could be expected to value formal accuracy and close teacher guidance towards it, as a consequence of the teaching they had been exposed to.

The students' own perception was that EAPW was not their strong skill. In their survey, 34% of the students identified EAPW as their weakest skill, and 38% perceived it as their second weakest skill, after speaking. Other questions about EAPW were not asked in the background survey, knowing that the writing samples (essays and reflections) would provide ample evidence.

Based on the diagnostic essay completed on day one, half of the students were deemed ready for basic EAPW based on obtaining scores of 2, while the other half received scores of 3 and 4 and were considered ready for freshman EAPW. According to the criteria (Appendix C), the students who were ready for freshman EAPW could write an essay which was coherent, appropriately supported, and mostly correct from a lexical, grammatical, and mechanical point of view. Those ready for basic composition wrote essays which were insufficiently developed, organized, and supported, and difficult to understand due to word choice and grammar errors. The main strengths and weaknesses identified by the raters (*Table 3*) foreshadowed a population of students who had the ability to present clear main ideas realized as thesis statements and topic sentences in a short argumentative essay, but struggled producing evidence to develop those ideas and wrapping them up in a conclusion. A sample can be seen in Appendix D.

Strengths	Percentage of papers	Weaknesses	Percentage of papers
Clarity of ideas (thesis statement and topic sentences)	74%	Underdeveloped personal response	68%
Organization	26%	Underdeveloped or moralistic essay conclusions	32%

*Table 3.* Main strengths and weaknesses of student writing in the diagnostic essay (day 1)

At the end of the summer EAPW course, certain features – namely, summaries, rhetorical analyses, intra-paragraph cohesion, and paragraph conclusions – were very good or excellent.

This suggested that the future EAPW course could be expected to be successful in these important aspects, if that online course had a similar level of efficacy.

	Percentage of papers rated as <b>Excellent</b>	Percentage of papers rated as <b>Very good</b>	Percentage of papers rated as <b>Good</b>	Percentage of papers rated as <b>Fair</b>	Percentage of papers rated as <b>Poor</b>
<b>Introduction</b> introduces essay topic	5%	32%	45%	18%	0%
<b>Thesis</b> is clear	2%	30%	16%	39%	14%
<b>Rhetorical analysis</b>					
Has a clear topic sentence	57%	18%	5%	14%	7%
Provides supporting evidence	2%	36%	25%	32%	5%
Has a central focus (intra-paragraph cohesion)	0%	52%	23%	23%	2%
Relates to thesis and paragraphs (inter-paragraphs cohesion)	0%	9%	14%	75%	2%
Has a conclusion	2%	7%	66%	25%	0%
<b>Response</b>					
Has a clear topic sentence	2%	25%	36%	34%	2%
States a personal response	2%	25%	43%	25%	5%
Has a central focus (intra-paragraph cohesion)	2%	36%	32%	30%	0%
Provides supporting evidence	5%	32%	43%	20%	0%
Relates to thesis and paragraphs (inter-paragraphs cohesion)	2%	20%	25%	52%	0%
Has a conclusion	5%	25%	39%	32%	0%
<b>Conclusion</b> wraps up successfully	2%	9%	36%	50%	2%
<b>Sentence structure</b> is correct	11%	2%	84%	2%	0%
<b>Word choice</b> is correct	14%	2%	84%	0%	0%
<b>Spelling and punctuation</b> are correct	9%	2%	89%	0%	0%

Table 4. Final essay ratings

At the discourse level, the students' topic sentences and thesis statements continued to be good. More rhetorical analysis paragraphs than personal response paragraphs had very good or excellent topic sentences. The students had better command over their thesis statements and topic sentences in discourse structures they knew – the five-paragraph/guided essay and rhetorical text analysis – than in new and culturally challenging discourse structures (such as personal responses). This suggests that the weaker performance in the final essay is likely due to adapting to new writing tasks, rather than to the fact that they did not know how to write an academic essay. As mentioned by the teachers at the Chinese institutions and some authors recently (Liao & Chen, 2009; You, 2004a, 2004b; 2010), Chinese students are exposed to western EAPW structures such as the five-paragraph or guided essay. The participants in this study were able to apply that knowledge to a similar format in the diagnostic essay, but they were challenged by the final essay, which – as a new writing task – deviated from the familiar, predictable patterns of the typical five-paragraph essay. Additionally, the topic sentences of the personal response paragraphs may have been weaker than those in the rhetorical analysis because of cultural reasons. They highlight individual opinions and may be, by implication, confrontational to the audience. In Confucian tradition, Chinese writers subordinate “I” to “we” and find it difficult to argue as well as support one's own opinion with evidence from sources other than an assumed collective moral consciousness. As a result, Chinese writers can encounter difficulties taking a stand and supporting it (Liao & Chen, 2009, p. 713).

Other features of the Chinese students' EAPW which were not superior included inter-paragraph cohesion, grammar and vocabulary. At the sentence level, an area of need for the students in this study includes sentence structure, word choice, spelling, and punctuation. The finding that these were good for 84%-89% of the participants did not completely coincide with

the Chinese teachers' perception. In their opinion, the students' needs in these areas were dire. Linguistic and discourse-level difficulties have been previously identified for Chinese students in EAPW courses (Hinkel, 1995, 2001, 2002, 2003; Liu & Braine, 2005) and continue to present challenges. Because they were not severe, and one of the goals of a future EAPW course is to provide the very instruction that would help the students overcome difficulties, the researcher/course developer concluded that the student population was adequately prepared for a freshman-level EAPW course.

Student reflections elicited in the second and fifth week of the summer session were another source of information about which aspects of EAPW the students perceived as difficult. Due to the brevity of the session, the information from the reflections written in the second week (see sample prompt in Appendix E) can be considered still overall reflective of the students' perceptions prior to instruction.

Skills perceived as difficult by the students	Percentage of students	
	Week two	Week five
Vocabulary	41%	8%
Text interpretation	28%	13%
Writing a summary	10%	-
Organizing/structuring an essay	10%	3%
Applying knowledge about writing to one's own writing	10%	10%

*Table 5.* Skills perceived as difficult by the students in the second and fifth week of the session

As shown in *Table 5*, early in the session, 41% of the students were concerned about not having the vocabulary richness and sophistication they thought they needed for EAPW. After learning that an elevated vocabulary is not more valuable than rich content and clear organization, the percentage of students concerned about their vocabulary decreased to 8% at the end of the session. The initial reaction of the students reflects values about writing that the students are

likely to bring with them into an EAPW course. The study shows that exposure to academic discourse, class discussions, and feedback on EAPW adjusts the students' perception of their own vocabulary needs. A related finding from the mid-term student reflections was that 28% of the students found reading western texts difficult, primarily due to their self-perceived vocabulary issues. Although the percentage decreased to 13% by the end of the session, some students' apprehension over understanding texts is an attitude a teacher should be prepared to address. While all non-native-English speaking students will have a need to develop their vocabulary in an EAPW course, the need that is more obvious here is one for defining the characteristics of academic genre and helping learners calibrate their expectations accordingly.

Due to the open-ended nature of the reflections, other aspects of EAPW which were perceived as difficult or easy emerged from the data, but occurred with low frequency; therefore, they are not reported.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

To sum up, the study performed a comprehensive NA which combined multiple data sources to identify the online and EAPW learning needs of Chinese students from a partner institution. With regard to the students' online learning needs, it showed that most students were interested in online learning and were not technological novices even though most of them were not proficient users of instructional applications. The ensuing pedagogical implication is that an online EAPW course would need to incorporate substantial support for online learning, as has been suggested more generally in the research on online learning (Blake, 2007; Goertler, 2011; Li & Ranieri, 2010) and even in the few studies dealing with Chinese students in online writing courses (Chen, 2009; Hui et al., 2008; Liou & Peng, 2009). Specifically, the EAPW course should provide: materials designed for the online medium; technical support materials for EFL

learners; and mandatory training prior to the beginning of the course. It also seems important that the course instructor be extensively available, particularly during online group interactions, in order to manage the negotiation of roles among the students and create a culture of regular use of the course website. An administrative and pedagogical alternative is to restrict enrollment in the future online course to students with prior experience in online courses. This strategy would alleviate teacher and student concerns with the technological side of the course, freeing up resources for dealing with the course content. Lowering the course enrollment cap would allow the teacher to engage more effectively with the students, though this path is not the most financially advantageous for the enrolling university. In the end, an institution's decision to develop online courses must take into account that both students and teachers seem to become comfortable with online learning once they are required to deal with it, even though their enthusiasm for it may be low at first, and even when initial technical training is not provided (Hsieh & Liou, 2009; Xing et al., 2008). Ultimately, technological savvy cannot develop unless technology starts being actually used (Barrette, 2001). Therefore, it seems that even a relatively low level of technological proficiency may suffice for initiating online learning programs, with the understanding that concerted efforts may need to be invested into teacher and student technological training.

The analysis showed that a complete revision of the existing EAPW curriculum at the U.S. institution would be unnecessary. As the latter is fairly typical of the freshman composition curriculum at U.S. institutions, extrapolations can be made to similar institutions. Half of the students in this study were ready for the freshman EAPW course at the U.S. institution even though they had completed only the first year of their mandatory English courses at the Chinese institution. The study also suggests that EAPW courses with Chinese students may not need to

place heavy emphasis on some of the basic notions of EAPW. EAPW course developers should be aware that their Chinese students nowadays might master some basic principles of EAPW, as a result of recent efforts in China towards incorporating western writing norms in the teaching of English writing there (De Palma & Ringer, 2011; Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2012; You, 2010). In addition, variations in the students' performance are likely to be caused by the fact that students are learning how to write new text types rather than by their lack of knowledge about basic EAPW principles. Apart from this shift in our understanding of Chinese student EAPW, it is important to recognize cultural and linguistic factors which continue to influence the EAPW performance of Chinese students, and therefore, the courses designed for them. In this study, the Chinese value of modesty caused the students to find personal response tasks difficult. This is also another illustration of the modern blending of western and Confucian rhetorical traditions which occur in the writing of contemporary Chinese students (You, 2010). Another constant challenge institutions should remember when creating EAPW courses for Chinese students is that even though they may be better prepared in the area of paragraph writing in EAP, Chinese students still face an uphill battle in English grammar and essay-level cohesion (Hinkel, 1995, 2001, 2002, 2003; Liu & Braine, 2005) – like many other international students. Teachers of online EAPW for Chinese students should, therefore, continue to be educated about rhetorical and linguistic traits of EAPW by Chinese students (Liao & Chen, 2009), as some of them endure.

This study's findings also highlight the important role that concrete institutional factors play in shaping teacher attitudes which, in turn, shape learner needs. Other intrinsic and social factors also influence teachers and learners, but teachers in particular have a well-recognized gatekeeping role; at the same time, their actions and attitudes are the byproduct of the overall priorities and resources of their educational system or institution (also see Ortega, 2009;

Reichelt, 2009; You, 2004a, 2004b). Even though expected to experiment with online teaching, in accordance with recommendations from the Chinese Ministry of Education and the local administration, the English teachers at the institution in this study did not have access to the professional development – though not the material resources – necessary to implement technological applications successfully. A generational difference was noted in that the students were interested in online courses, whereas the teachers regarded them as “less than” face-to-face courses. The gaps in teacher preparation thus lead to student underexposure to online learning. Under such circumstances, it seems that an international collaboration which is mutually desired by two institutions can proceed by first relying on the partner which already has the necessary expertise to design and teach online courses. During the first course offering, teachers from the partner institution can audit the course and learn how to teach online, while also acting as content and cultural consultants on the course design. In time, a more equal collaboration can develop, and the responsibility of teaching the course can transfer entirely to the Chinese partner, if so desired by the institutions. As the rules for internationalization are still being written, institutions can decide the terms of their partnership as it suits them at the different stages of the process.

Effects of the larger environment were also found in the realm of EAPW at the Chinese institution, with several consequences for the design and implementation of the future online EAPW course. The instructors’ high regard for grammatical and structural accuracy, combined with their resistance to experimenting with process writing, peer-review and self-assessment, are the consequence of not only cultural beliefs but also long-lasting systemic issues with large class sizes and limited professional development. Such practices and concerns have been documented in other studies about EAPW pedagogy in China, where the realities of the context (such as class size and teacher workloads) intersect with traditionally Chinese views of the importance of

elevated vocabulary and correct linguistic forms (You, 2004a, 2004b). This study shows that such realities persist at Chinese institutions, predisposing the U.S.-bound Chinese students to expecting focus on form. The pedagogical and administrative implication is that, should partner U.S. and Chinese universities wish to share the responsibilities of designing and teaching an online EAPW course, pedagogical training in EAPW should be offered to the Chinese instructors in order to ensure a consistent approach to the course. Chinese co-instructors, instructional consultants, or on-site tutors at the Chinese institution should participate increasingly in the course. In the process of learning about EAPW pedagogy, they can teach the U.S. counterparts about the student population and cultural perspectives which influence their writing. Such a dynamic has the potential to put the expertise available at both institutions to good use, potentially leading to a truly mutually benefiting relationship. Overall, any of the suggested set ups for an online EAPW course would lead to cross-cultural cooperation and resource pooling (Alosh, 2001), as well as opportunities for developing intercultural competence among teachers and students (Blake, 2007). The soundness of this suggestion remains to be tested by further research.

The study also illustrates the value of tapping into several data sources in order to obtain a full and reliable representation of a student population's needs. Vocabulary needs, for example, were very important in the teachers' and students' perception, but not according to the writing samples analysis. Had writing samples not been collected, the plans for the future online EAPW course might have given disproportionate attention to vocabulary development. Conversely, had student reflections not been collected, it would not have been evident that as many as 41% of the students were concerned about their vocabulary and the way it was going to impact their writing. As a result of having all this information, it is possible to design an online course which focuses

on vocabulary to the extent necessary to support reading and writing activities, while making it a priority to define the features of U.S. academic discourse. Through textual analyses and discussions about the features of academic discourse, the course can meet the students' subjective need to learn (about) vocabulary, and, at the same time, their objective need to develop competence in EAPW.

The current needs assessment was grounded in the particular circumstances of two collaborating institutions and fulfilled the purpose of uncovering the online learning and EAPW competencies that the partnering institutions could draw upon in their work together. It represents just the first step in a longer, cyclical process of continued analysis. Naturally, further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of the syllabus designed based on the present needs assessment and more generally of online EAPW courses for dually enrolled students from China or other countries.

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## Appendix A

### Student Survey

Last name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_ First name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: F M Major: \_\_\_\_\_ Minor: \_\_\_\_\_

**When** did you start studying English? \_\_\_\_\_

**Where** did you start studying English? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you spent any time in the U.S. or another English-speaking country? \_\_\_\_\_

For what purpose? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you plan to study in the US? (circle one) Yes No

When? \_\_\_\_\_ Where? \_\_\_\_\_

For what degree and in what discipline/major/specialization? \_\_\_\_\_

Put the following skills in order from your best to your least good. 1- best, 2 – second best, 3 – third best, 4 – fourth best.

\_\_\_\_\_ English speaking

\_\_\_\_\_ English writing

\_\_\_\_\_ English listening

\_\_\_\_\_ English reading

What do you think you need to learn to become a better writer in English? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

When did you first start using a computer? \_\_\_\_\_

For what purposes? \_\_\_\_\_

What are you best at on the computer? Write “1” next to your best skill, “2” by the second and “3” by your third good skill.

Word processing

Email

Chat (circle all that apply):    audio chat    video chat    Instant messaging (text) chat

Gaming

Listening to music

Designing art

Designing web pages

Uploading/downloading files

Troubleshooting

Other \_\_\_\_\_

How many **hours a week** do you use a computer for work related to your courses? \_\_\_\_\_

How many **hours a week** do you spend on the computer for other purposes? List the things you do.

How many online courses in Chinese have you taken at the University? List them and indicate if they were fully online or hybrid (part face-to-face and part online): \_\_\_\_\_

How many online courses in English have you taken at the University? List them and indicate if they were fully online or hybrid (part face-to-face and part online): \_\_\_\_\_

Which tools have you used in the online or hybrid courses you have taken: (circle all that apply)

Course notes (resources)

Email

Gradebook

Wiki

Blog

Chat

Forum/discussion board

Calendar

Other \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Teacher Survey

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Undergraduate student: Yes / No Major \_\_\_\_\_ Minor \_\_\_\_\_

Graduate student: Yes / No If graduate, circle one: MA-level Ph.D.-level

Area of study: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher: Yes / No If yes, what do you teach and at what level? (Ex: 6<sup>th</sup> grade English) \_\_\_\_\_

Faculty: Yes / No Specialty: \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been teaching English? \_\_\_\_\_ What level? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever taught English writing courses? Yes / No For how long? \_\_\_\_\_ What level (ex: , 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, high school, university, professional, etc.)? \_\_\_\_\_

What kinds of assignments do you require your students to write? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever taught online? \_\_\_\_\_ What did you teach? \_\_\_\_\_ For how long? \_\_\_\_\_

What online tools did you use? \_\_\_\_\_

What did you require your students to do online? \_\_\_\_\_

Your ability to teach English is (circle one): excellent      very good      fair      good      poor

Your ability to teach English WRITING is (circle one): excellent      very good      fair      good  
poor

What are you **best** at as a teacher of English? \_\_\_\_\_

What are you **worst** at as a teacher of English? \_\_\_\_\_

What are you **best** at as a teacher of *English writing*? \_\_\_\_\_

What are you **worst** at as a teacher of English writing? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your strength as a writer in English? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your weakness as a writer in English? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Holistic Rating Criteria for Diagnostic Essay

#### **A 4 essay: Competent**

The essay effectively addresses the prompt; is unified and coherent, and shows a logical progression of ideas; supports generalizations with appropriate details; demonstrates consistent facility in the use of language, but errors may occur (articles, prepositions or tense usage). Errors do not interfere with meaning. Essay demonstrates syntactic variety and range of vocabulary.

#### **A 3 essay: Basically competent**

The essay: addresses the prompt adequately; has a basic, if not expert, organizational pattern; uses some details to support a thesis. Development may be uneven. Grammar and mechanical problems may be present, but do not dominate the essay nor obscure meaning. The essay demonstrates some syntactic variety. Vocabulary is, for the most part, appropriate and varied.

#### **A 2 essay: Developing competence**

The essay responds coherently to the prompt, but may lack amplitude; is inadequately organized or developed; fails to support generalizations with sufficient or appropriate details. The essay displays an accumulation of errors in sentence structure and usage. Problems with word choice or word/verb forms may interfere with meaning.

#### **A 1 essay: Lacks competence**

The essay responds minimally to the prompt. The essay is incoherent. It may have no discernible organization pattern. It has little or no detail, or irrelevant detail. It contains serious errors in verb construction, word forms, and word order; vocabulary is limited.

## Appendix D

### Diagnostic essay sample

[Summary] The passage talks about the study of the “Rac,” a sacred animal of the tribe called ASU, which is found on the American continent north of Mexico. Since the rac is highly honoured in the ASU tribe, which is a highly developed society, everyone who reaches sixteen is supposed to own at least one rac. The more racs one owns, the higher social position he or she will have. Despite the high cost and some other problems such as the special problem, the waste problem and the damage that caused by the racs, the ASU still regard it as being essential to the survival of their culture.

[Reaction/Argument] In my opinion, the ASU’s (USA written backwards) attitude towards racs (cars read backwards) is reasonable. For one thing, every culture has its own beliefs, which motivate people to keep moving forward. “Racs” play an indispensable part in the ASU tribe, which is essential to keep the people in high spirit. For another thing, keeping racs has become a tradition in the ASU tribe. As harmony is highly specialized in the modern world, we should pay respect to the special culture of the ASU tribe. So, the attitude of the ASU (USA) towards racs (cars) is acceptable.

Score: 4 (4-)

Main strength: clarity

Main weakness: length (short)

## **Appendix E**

### Midterm reflection prompt

What have you learned in the course so far? What about EAPW is easy or difficult for you, and why? What should we start/stop/continue to do in this course, and why?