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The Case of Iranian Students' Textual Practices in North American Graduate Schools

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**Intercultural Rhetoric in Higher Education: The Case of Iranian Students' Textual
Practices in North American Graduate Schools**

Nahal Akbari Saneh

**Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

As part of their academic activities, English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) graduate students in North American universities are expected to engage in a range of literacy practices of which writing is a major component. This study investigates the attitudes, perceptions and practices of five Iranian ESL students and the expectations of their professors in the context of disciplinary writing in higher education. In response to a recent call in the field of contrastive rhetoric for broadening the scope and revisiting the research methods in cultural studies of second language writing (Atkinson, 2004; Connor, 2004; Panetta, 2001), this qualitative inquiry is informed by a social theory of language (Bakhtin, 1986), a semiotic theory of culture (Lotman, 1990/ 2001), a situated literacies perspective of academic writing (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000), and a view of reasoning and argumentation as a socio-historic construct (Toulmin, 2001, 1964/2003). Data sources include text-based interviews with students, interviews with their professors, observation of tutoring sessions, and the analysis of textual artifacts as well as the written feedback provided on student writing. The findings point to a common perception of cultural differences between the textual practices of the students and those practices that are dominant in the context of their disciplines. The differences are discussed in terms of the educational background of the students, their past and present membership in various communities of practice, as well as a view of texts as historical constructs. The study further highlights some of the initial encounter experiences of the participating students in academic contact zones (Pratt, 1991), questioning the effectiveness of certain approaches that readers/evaluators adopt in responding to student writing. The research contributes to a re-conceptualization of the notion of culture in studies of second language writing, challenges the assumed homogeneity of

argumentation as an academic literacy practice, and helps promote a dialogic view that is responsive to the textual practices of an increasingly diverse student population in North American academic settings.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Over the last few years, North American academic institutions have hosted an increasingly large number of international students from all over the world. With close to 700,000 international students enrolled in Canada and the United States every year, North America has become, in the words of an American educator, “to the modern world what Alexandria in Egypt was to the ancient world” (Ubadigbo, 1997, p. 2). According to a survey report published by the American Institute of International Education (IIE), the number of international students enrolled in American colleges and universities increased at an unprecedented rate in the 2007-2008 academic year. Significant increases are reported in the enrollment of international graduate students from three leading places of origin including India, East Asia, and the Middle East (*Open Doors*, 2007)¹. North American institutions of higher education openly welcome and take pride in such diversity in their student body. In an article published in the news magazine of my home university, for instance, the Vice President states:

With faculty and students originating from more than 150 countries, University of Ottawa is one of Canada's most cosmopolitan post-secondary institutions We see our diversity as an enduring source of strength and inspiration. . . . [We are] a microcosm of Canada.²

Another major University in the United States has included a similar statement in among its missions and goals:

¹ Source: *Open Doors* 2007: Report on International Education Exchange. Published by IIE, retrieved December 28, 2007 from <http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/>

² Retrieved March 15, 2005 from http://www.tabaret.uottawa.ca/article_e_211.html

The University counts among its greatest strengths -- and a major component of its excellence -- the diversity of its faculty, students, and staff. [This University] strives to . . . celebrate diversity in all of its programs and activities, and to recruit and retain qualified graduate and undergraduate minority students. We will work to . . . attract first-rate international students. (Mission and goals statement, 2006, p. 2)³

While the institutional voice in these excerpts cherishes diversity, there is a flip side to a multilingual and multicultural student population that is often overlooked. These students bring with them diverse literacy practices, multiple preferences for styles of teaching and learning, and socially constructed attitudes and writer identities not necessarily the same as those privileged in their new academic communities (Belcher & Connor, 2001; Fox, 1994; Gee, 2001; Ivanič, 1998; Leki, 2006; Shen, 1989; Tucker, 1995). With writing being at the core of the academic literacy practices that graduate students engage in, such differences and the challenges associated with them are often more pronounced in the texts these students produce, and the way faculty respond to and evaluate their writings. In response to a pressing concern in our diverse graduate schools, a growing body of research is exploring second language writing in higher education as an intercultural enterprise (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Casanave, 2002; Connor, 2004; Hirvala & Belcher, 2001; Paltridge, 2002). Along this line, the present research takes a closer look at the textual practices and the experiences of five Iranian graduate students from three different universities in Canada and the United States with

³Retrieved February 12, 2007 from <http://www.Strategic-Planning/MissionAndGoals2006.pdf>

disciplinary writing, and the insights and expectations of their content area professors as to what writing in graduate schools is about. More specifically, the study draws on a dynamic cultural conceptualization (Atkinson, 2004; Holliday, 1999) of constructing academic arguments and organizing the rhetorical structure of texts that is informed by students' attitudes toward and perceptions of academic writing, the associated norms and standards in the institutional context, and the expectations and responses of faculty to students' texts. The research is situated at the intersection of three areas of inquiry including intercultural rhetoric (Connor, Nagelhout, & Rozycki, 2008), New Literacy Studies (Gee, 2000; Lea & Street, 1999), and critical academic writing research (Benesch, 2001a; Canagarajah, 2002b; Casanave, 2003).

A note on the choice of terminology in this text is in order here: Throughout this research study, I have used the terms English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to make a distinction between two contexts of language learning. ESL refers to English speaking contexts like North America, Australia, and England, as well as countries such as Singapore or Kenya, where English is an official language. An EFL context is one in which English is not the official language of the country, and learners are normally only exposed to the foreign language in formal instructional settings. Although these dichotomous terms, along with others such as native/non native or first/second language (L1 and L2) speaker are widely used in applied linguistics and educational research, they have been subject to criticism on the grounds of sociopolitical concerns in an era of globalization and intercultural communication (Canagarajah, 1999; Nayar, 1997; Rampton, 1990; Shuck, 2006). Acronyms such as EAL (standing for *English as an additional language* and *English as an Associate Language*)

have been proposed, but I believe that they continue to be dichotomizing at some level, and they are less known to audiences outside applied linguistics. I therefore chose not to use them in this text. I will, however, avoid the native/non-native binary because of its serious shortcomings and the problematic ownership overtones. For the lack of a better alternative, I will use second language writer or L2 writer to refer to international students whose first literacy experience has been in a language other than English, but are currently engaged in literacy practices in educational settings in North America where English is the language of instruction and communication.

I first found a cultural view of writing to be an intriguing research area during my undergraduate studies back in Iran in the early 1990s. As a requirement for my major in the English language, I took an academic writing course with a British professor who at the time described most of the English writings of my Iranian peers as vague, unclear, irrelevant to the topic, and somehow non –English. I recall that one of the first assignments that she gave the class was writing a short paragraph titled “How to make a perfect cup of tea”. The reaction from the instructor that I vividly remember to this day as students went to her desk to share their paragraphs with her was reading the very first sentence, crossing it out with her red pen, and commenting in a dismissive manner: “This sentence is irrelevant to the topic!”, and not even reading the rest of the paragraph. After giving individual feedback to several students, she told the class that she found it peculiar that rather than responding to the straightforward question the prompt was asking, we had started our paragraphs with irrelevant points such as the health benefits of drinking tea, the fact that it was the most popular beverage in the world, or that it was the traditional drink of many Iranian families. The students did not seem to agree that these were not

relevant; they were in fact reluctant to jump into the topic as the instructor expected them to, without what they believed to be a proper introduction. Similar experiences in other courses that I took which involved writing in English, as well as the ones that I later taught in Iran and Canada brought home to me the idea that writing is indeed a culturally-shaped practice. My readings in the area of contrastive rhetoric, a writing research field that argues for cultural ways of thinking that shape different writing patterns in different languages, resonate with my personal experiences in some ways, and certainly influence my assumptions about second language writing. I believe there are differences between first and second language writing that have their roots in a confluence of cultural, social, educational, and experiential differences.

At the same time, I find it problematic to attribute the differences between L1 and L2 writing to a static definition of cultures and cultural ways of thinking associated with linguistic, ethnic, or racial entities. The perpetual state of flux of cultures caused by the movement of individuals and intercultural exchanges characterizing the current age of globalization makes it virtually impossible to define any pure form of a culture in modern societies (Clifford, 1988). As a result, I believe claiming that certain texts and their rhetorical features are representative of particular cultures and national languages, which by the way has been the case with numerous contrastive rhetoric studies, would be questionable. This is particularly true with respect to academic writing, which has been internationalized and anglicized well before the current move toward globalization (Mauranen, 2001; Pennycook, 1998). Instead, I assume that writing is a social act and that the written text is a socially situated artifact. Texts can thus be perceived as cultural products only to the extent that the sociocultural forces around their production, reception

and interpretation both at the level of the local context of writing and at the broader social, discursive, and institutional level are taken into account. This perspective has direct implications for the present study as it explores the texts and textual practices of ESL students in academic contexts from a dynamic sociocultural rather than a traditional static cultural perspective.

This said, however, second language writing research has for the most part adopted an all-or-nothing attitude toward a cultural conceptualization of academic writing. The literature of this research area is replete with static cultural stereotypes about the patterns of writing in different languages and cultures that are believed to negatively influence L2 writing on one hand (see Connor, 1996), and attempts to avoid such problematic generalizations through a complete dismissal of the role of first language and cultural background in shaping second language writing on the other (Scollon, 1997; Spack, 1997a). The decision to conduct a detailed inquiry into the experiences of second language graduate students of Iranian background was partly motivated by a recent call in the field of contrastive rhetoric, now more appropriately referred to as intercultural rhetoric (Connor, Nagelhout, & Rozycki, 2008). Researchers are encouraged to move beyond essentializing or analytical stereotyping of second language writers' texts, while they continue to draw attention to the significant and valuable insights that cultural studies of writing can offer.

The contribution of this study to a theory of intercultural rhetoric lies in bridging the gap between the two extreme views described by drawing on a socially informed theoretical framework in a rhetorical study of the writings of students from a particular linguistic background. This is a step toward addressing the familiar charge against

applied linguistics and second language writing research regarding the incommensurability of their discourse of isolated texts and de-contextualized contexts (Pennycook, 1994, 1999) with the Foucauldian conception of discourses as systems of power/knowledges. As Pennycook (1994) notes:

To think in terms of discourse in a Foucauldian sense is useful, I believe, because it allows [applied linguistics] to understand how meaning is produced not at the will of a unitary humanist subject, not as a quality of a linguistic system, and not as determined by socio-economic relations, but rather through a range of power/knowledge systems that organize texts, create conditions of possibility for different language acts, and are embedded in social institutions. (p. 128)

To this end, Bakhtin's (1986) notion of dialogicality and Lotman's (1990/2001) closely associated conception of cultures as semiospheres and texts as semiotic spaces for dialogic interaction are key theoretical components of this study. Together these concepts provide a basis for viewing second language writers' texts as the nexus of interaction between writers and readers. Accordingly, text-based interviews during which student writers reflect on their particular textual decisions and rhetorical choices constitute a key data source in this study. Equally important is the way those choices and rhetorical ways of meaning are understood and received by their readers, which are explored in interviews with professors.

Invoking the notion of dialogicality brings to fore the issue of encounter with the other and the ethical aspect of such encounters in contact zones (Olson, 1999). Originally defined by Mary Louise Pratt as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple

with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1991, p. 34), the notion of contact zones has been adopted in composition and writing studies with postcolonial and post-structuralist inclinations (Olson, 1999). This offers a useful way of conceptualizing student papers as the point where the perception of student writers and the expectations of the audience meet. As a common educational practice and an essential component of the learning cycle, professors provide written feedback on student papers, which in this research study is conceived of as a site for interaction and simultaneously a zone of contact. This leads to yet another, perhaps more significant aspect of this study, which is the problematization of current practices around responding to students’ texts. This research study explores how second language writers’ texts, shaped by their prior literacy practices and their relatively limited familiarity with the dominant institutional discourse, are received and evaluated by their readers/assessors. The study therefore contributes to the under-researched topic of students’ perspectives on the faculty’s feedback on their papers, its value and effectiveness (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Weaver, 2006). Furthermore, an up-close look at the personal stories of the research participants in terms of the impact of feedback on their educational and emotional experiences, particularly thorough their early encounter experiences, provides a basis for a call to adopt more dialogic approaches in responding to student writing.

Because of the centrality of reasoning and argumentation in academic discourse, in terms of the genres of writing, the particular focus of this study has been on argumentative texts. In general terms, argumentation pertains to term papers, research proposals, position statements and synthesis reports, where graduate students are supposed to advance their position on a particular topic and defend, refute, or critically

evaluate a certain viewpoint. Argumentation is, as such, an indispensable part of the literate activity in higher education (Andrews, 2005; Belcher, 1997; Kaufer & Geisler, 1991; Medway, 1989; Mitchell & Andrews, 2000). As another component of its socially informed conception of academic writing, this study draws on Toulmin's (1964/2003) seminal work and his insightful position that what counts as appropriate argument and convincing reasoning might vary according to historical, disciplinary, and social context (Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1984). Toulmin postulates that each social context constructs a rhetorical version of rationality, which has its own criteria for soundness not necessarily applicable to other contexts. Toulmin's model of argumentation is in fact a realization of the interwoven nature of the rhetorical structure of the text and the context of writing (Freedman & Medway, 1994). The model powerfully demonstrates how social circumstances call for certain rhetorical arrangements in an argument and require particular ways of orchestrating the text.

Although the argumentative essay has long been explored as a challenging genre for ESL students in cultural studies of writing and rhetoric (Connor, 1990; Ferris, 1994; Hirose, 2003; Keiko, 2003), few, if any of these studies, have looked at argumentation as a socially constructed activity. The situated, context sensitive approach (Prior, 2004; Selzer, 2004) of the current study to the analysis of academic writing in general and argumentative texts in particular challenges the assumed homogeneity of argumentative genre, and further supports the position that the soundness of an argument has to be treated as a field-dependant matter (Toulmin, 1964/ 2003). It is on these grounds that the effectiveness of the teaching of argumentation in academic writing courses, and

providing tutorial or editorial services in academic writing centers that are detached from the disciplines is questioned and further discussed as the study unfolds.

In light of the theoretical and analytical underpinnings described, this inquiry is an investigation into the attitudes, perceptions and understandings that shape the textual practices and rhetorical decisions of some student writers in the context of their graduate coursework. Of particular interest is the meaning of the choices the participants make from their own perspective, since as Prior (2004) argues, too much is lost in studies of writing that focus on isolated texts:

[T]here is much that cannot be captured by these methods: exchanges that are missed; the writer's thoughts, feelings, and sense-making; contexts that do not appear in the text. In particular, it is useful to elicit writers' accounts of their goals, their contexts, their processes, their feelings, the meanings they see in their texts, the influences they are aware of or can reflectively construct for what they have written and done. (pp. 179-180)

Furthermore, because of "the primacy of context over text" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 428), the accepted norms and dominant practices within the localized context of writing as well as the broader social and institutional context in the students' past and present educational experiences are indispensable components of this inquiry. All these together make up a dynamic conceptualization of the cultural ways for writing that make the experiences of the participating second language writer unique.

While this study seeks to uncover the perceptions and draw attention to the textual practices of graduate students from a particular linguistic background vis-à-vis the acceptable literacy practices in institutions of higher education, it is important to note that

this is not an argument for entirely disregarding the dominant practices and replacing them with a multiplicity of alternative models of writing, none valued over the other. Nor is it meant to challenge the English academic institutions and faculty members to become experts in the culturally shaped writing styles of students coming their way from all over the world. What this study aims to highlight is the often untold stories of students who start their graduate school experience at a strikingly different point compared to their peers - first or second language speakers of English- who have done all or part of their schooling in North America. International graduate students get initiated into the dominant practices, which they are sometimes far less familiar with compared to their peers, through active participation in the disciplinary communities (Gee, 2000; Prior, 1998; Wenger, 1998) regardless of their language proficiency test scores and the number of academic writing courses they take in advance. Feeling that their literacy practices are not validated or their efforts to approximate the dominant discourse are not recognized can be counter-productive particularly during the initial stages. The purpose of this inquiry in this regard is to “interject an awareness” (Olson, 1999, p. 96) into the discussion of student textual practices as rhetorical ways of meaning (Bakhtin, 1986) rather than deficiencies or problems, and consequently revisiting the issue of providing written feedback on disciplinary writing of multiliterate students. The research presented here by no means intends to generalize the experiences of the participants or make any definitive statements about differences between the rhetorical styles of English and Persian. Rather, my hope is that the stories of these participants’ early challenges with writing in graduate school will resonate with some students, professors, and writing researchers.

On a different note, I would like to reflect on an important point discussed in detail in the methodology chapter. In her sketched agenda for a new generation of L2 writing and literacy studies, Leki (2000) suggests that “one potentially fruitful but underrepresented type of study is in-depth interviews and observational investigations by researchers who speak the same language as the research participants” (p. 105). I did not fully recognize the importance of this observation until I undertook the current project. Working with participants from my own linguistic background provided me with a unique opportunity for rapport building with the participants in the course of the study. In addition, the participants had a choice as to the language of the interview, and in most cases constantly switched back and forth between English and Persian during the course of our conversations which I believe gave them an opportunity to express their views and experiences in a very powerful manner without the usual language barrier associated with interviewing second language speakers. In some cases, they provided me with samples of their writing in Persian and the feedback they had received on it, which was also a very valuable source of data that would not have been accessible to me otherwise.

Overview of Chapters

The rest of this work will be presented in six chapters:

Chapter Two provides a focused review of the literature in three interrelated areas that include cultural studies of second language writing embodied in current-traditional contrastive rhetoric and more recently in intercultural rhetoric research, the social turn in studies of language and education in general and New Literacy Studies in particular, as well as research on reasoning and argumentation in academic writing.

Chapter Three describes the theoretical framework that informs this inquiry. The theoretical insights that I draw on include the closely associated works of Bakhtin and Lotman on dialogicity, multivoicedness, and a conception of texts as semiotic spaces for dialogic interaction between readers and writers. Social literacies' take on reading and writing as cultural and social practices that vary depending on the particular context in which they occur informs the study from another angle, and critical academic literacy adds an institutional dimension to the discussion. The last component, Toulmin's theory of argumentation, provides an analytical tool for understanding and interpreting writing in higher education.

Chapter Four introduces the research methodology, context of the study, the participants, and the research questions in relation to the purpose of the study. It also includes a description of the data sources and the analytical process as well as my reflections on the research process.

Chapters Five and Six present and discuss the findings under two major themes. In Chapter Five, I will argue for a perceived difference between the rhetorical styles of Persian and English languages on the part of the Iranian graduate students, based on their literacy experiences back at home and in North American universities. Using sample texts and the analytical framework, the areas of difference are further explored with the participants during text-based interviews. Also, the expectations of faculty members which generally reflect institutionally sanctioned literacy practices are elicited, and their responses to certain rhetorical features in their students' papers are presented.

Chapter Six takes a critical look at the feedback provided by professors on student writings that somehow deviate from the expectations and dominant literacy practices.

Students speak to the question of the effectiveness of directive feedback and the way it influences their educational experience. They also reflect on the kind of feedback they perceive to be conducive to learning.

Finally, Chapter Seven revisits the discussions presented in the preceding two chapters, and offers some reflections on their implications for theory and practice.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

In order to put the present study into proper perspective, I draw on the existing body of knowledge in three relevant research areas through a focused review of relevant literature. These areas include cultural studies of second language writing generally conducted within the framework of contrastive rhetoric, current social approaches to writing and literacy research, and studies of reasoning and argumentation in higher education. After highlighting the contribution of the existing body of knowledge in each of these research areas to our current understanding of first and second language writing, I will reflect on what remains to be investigated, and how research into the intersection of these different areas can enhance our understanding of intercultural rhetoric in higher education and the literacy practices of second language writers in North American graduate schools.

L2 Writing and the Question of Culture: From Contrastive to Intercultural Rhetoric

The first systematic attempt to address the question of culture in second language writing studies was initiated more than forty years ago by Robert Kaplan. In a landmark research paper, Kaplan (1966) set out to empirically examine a pedagogical problem reported by ESL writing teachers: an element of foreignness in the writings of their students that went beyond the lexical and sentence level grammatical errors, and was described by the teachers as “lack of coherence”, “vagueness”, and “major organizational problems”. Describing writing as a cultural phenomenon in his often-cited research, Kaplan argued that each language has a unique set of culturally determined writing

conventions that can negatively influence the individual's writing in a second language. Studying over 600 English essays written by students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, he concluded that the languages he referred to as "Anglo-European" have a linear developmental structure, whereas Semitic, Slavic, and Oriental languages each follow a distinct pattern of textual organization (Connor, 1996, 2002; Kaplan, 1966). A major premise of Kaplan's work, which was echoing a strong version of the linguistic relativity hypothesis (Gumperz & Levinson, 1996; Whorf, 1956), was that the influence and control of first language on thought processes could lead to the production of second language texts that exhibit first language structural and rhetorical features.

Relieved by the proposed explanation for the writing problems of their students, ESL writing teachers embraced the idea of cultural writing patterns and began looking for ways to incorporate it into their practice. The result was the emergence of a field of research known as contrastive rhetoric, a line of pedagogically oriented studies of writing that compared and contrasted textual features such as coherence, the use of cohesive devices, writing styles and organizational structure of texts in different language. The field of contrastive rhetoric has ever since turned into a highly controversial line of writing research, as the empirical text-analytic studies conducted within this framework remain inconclusive to this date. While some studies continue to report differences in the rhetorical structure of different languages (Al-Qahtani, 2006; Bickner & Peyasantiwong, 1988; Connor & Lauer, 1988; Hinds, 1987, 1990; Hirose, 2003; Keiko, 2003; Ostler, 1987; Sa'adeddin, 1989; Wu & Rubin, 2000), others claim that there are no significant differences between the textual features under study across different languages (Cahill,

2003; Kubota, 1998; McCagg, 1996; Mohan & Lo, 1985; Saez, 2001; Spack, 1997a). The bulk of these studies compare, in broad strokes, the macro features of text types such as expository or argumentative texts, or analyze micro features of various genres of writing such as student essays, newspaper editorials, business letters, and grant proposals in English compared to those of other languages including Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Arabic, Hindi, German, French, Czech, and Finnish, among others (see Connor, 1996; Hinkle, 2005). They either point to the interference of the rhetorical conventions of L1 with ESL writing, or dismiss the role of such interference since distinct rhetorical differences are not observed in the sample texts under study. Some illustrative examples from each group are briefly reviewed below.

In his extensive and widely referenced series of genre specific rhetorical studies of writing across languages, Hinds (1983a, 1983b, 1987, 1990) argued for culture specific rhetorical patterns of text development. Through comparing the discourse of English expository prose to that of several Asian languages including Japanese, Hinds categorized languages into “writer- responsible” and “reader- responsible”, according to the degree to which effective communication of the meaning of propositions was the duty of the writer, as opposed to the extent to which the reader was expected to make inferential bridges to understand a text. He described English as a writer responsible language and Japanese as a reader-responsible one (Hinds, 1987). Hinds further demonstrated how, in his view, the rhetorical patterns of paragraph development of Oriental languages differed from those of English (Hinds, 1990). Describing the two dominant patterns of paragraph and essay development in English writing as inductive and deductive he contended:

Inductive writing is characterized as having the thesis statement in the final position (along with having supporting details before the thesis statement) whereas deductive writing has the thesis statement in the initial position (and supporting details after the thesis statement) . . . English, for example, allows either type of development, although the model that expository writers apparently aim for and that students are consciously taught tends to be deductive rather than inductive. (Hinds, 1990, p. 89)

The rhetorical style of text development in Oriental languages, on the other hand, was referred to as quasi-inductive by Hinds. He argued that the tendency in this approach would be to put the implied thesis statement near the end of the essay, leaving it to the reader to interpret the thesis in the way it was intended. While the linguistic typology offered by Hinds is believed to have uniquely contributed to writing research through drawing attention to the role of the interaction between readers and writers across languages and cultures (Silva & Matsuda, 2001), its results have been questioned by subsequent studies of Japanese rhetorical style. McCagg (1996), for instance, problematized the notion of reader-responsibility through re-analyzing the Japanese and English newspaper columns from the original study, and argued that the differences Hinds had noticed were in fact a function of limited mutually shared cultural and linguistic knowledge between the American readers and Japanese writers. Where writers and readers had such common knowledge, McCagg argued, Japanese texts generally did not require more cognitive effort to comprehend in comparison to English texts. Furthermore, Kubota's (1998) investigation of L1-L2 transfer in the academic writing of Japanese students revealed that about half of the 46 university students participating in the study who wrote essays both in Japanese and in English used similar rhetorical

patterns in their texts. The study also suggested that there was a positive correlation between the Japanese and ESL essays of the students in terms of the organization score assigned to them by the raters. Kubota used the results to argue against culture specific rhetorical styles that could be transferred to L2 writing because of the complexities associated with identifying a distinct national Japanese rhetorical pattern in the face of the influence of English on the development of contemporary Japanese writing.

Another instance of studies in support of culture specific rhetorical patterns is the research of Sa'adeddin (1989) on Arabic language. According to Sa'adeddin, in argumentation and rhetorical persuasion, the Arabic language relies heavily on parallel or coordinate structures, repetitions, and broad generalizations, as well as highly ornate and elaborate vocabulary. Through textual analysis of three sample texts and their English translations, he demonstrated how the transfer of Arabic rhetorical features to English translations could lead to the generation of texts that failed to interact with the English audience effectively, or even at times to communication breakdown. He contended that the observed textual features could be traced to the dominance of an aural mode in the Arabic language, which highly values those features as means of strengthening the rhetorical appeal. Harfmann (2004) made a similar claim with regards to the use of parallelisms and coordination in his cross-cultural study of German and Arabic. He analyzed twenty Arabic school essays written by Palestinian tenth and eleventh graders and compared them to 20 essays written by German students at the same grade levels, using a textual analysis model originally developed by House (1997) to assess the quality of translations. Harfmann concluded that Arabic essays employed coordination, repetition, and parallelism to achieve cohesion and to appeal to their audience.

Along with a proliferation of cultural studies of second language writing focusing on the rhetorical features of L1 and L2 texts, some voices began to challenge the very assumptions on which such studies were built during the 1980s and 1990s on two major grounds: too much focus on the text as the final product of writing at the expense of the cognitive writing processes (Mohan & Lo, 1985), and an unexamined use of the term *culture* leading to stereotyping ESL learners (Leki & Carson, 1997; Scollon, 1997; Spack, 1997a; Zamel, 1997).

Following the lead of first language composition researchers, proponents of cognitive processes argued that cultural studies of writing failed to take into account the complexity of the writing processes. In their study of the essays of ESL Chinese students in Hong Kong and British Colombia, Mohan and Lo (1985) argued that the writing patterns of these students were not markedly different from those dominant in the English language, and that the instruction the students received played a major part in the patterns their writings demonstrated. If anything, they argued, the writing problems of ESL learners had to do with the developmental stages of learning to write. Since many novice native English students might exhibit similar organizational problems in their writings, the authors argued, attributing writing problems to cultural differences would be unwarranted.

More recently, another appealing line of criticism has come from those who are not pleased with the way the term culture is employed in L2 rhetorical studies. Contrastive rhetoric is believed to be very much influenced by a commonsense understanding of culture as an all-encompassing, monolithic system of rules and patterns of behavior shared by geographically and nationally distinct groups of individuals

(Atkinson, 1999, 2003, 2004; Kubota & Lehner, 2004; Pennycook, 1997, 2001).

Although this received view of culture has been seriously questioned in anthropology and cultural studies within the past twenty years (Clifford, 1988; Geertz, 1983), it seems to have remained largely unexamined in contrastive rhetoric. Critics of mainstream cultural studies of L2 writing blame this line of research for smacking of cultural determinism, perpetuating binaries between English and other languages, and misleading writing teachers into adopting a “deficit orientation” (Zamel, 1997) towards their ESL students. As Leki (1997) argues:

The danger in accepting the traditional contrastive-rhetoric explanations for writing differences or cross-cultural explanations for behavioral differences is that such explanations risk turning ESL students into cardboard characters whose behavior is simply determined by these cultural norms and who have no individual differences or subtleties obscured by these behaviors. (p. 239)

Contrastive rhetoric’s failure to respond to the hybrid nature of cultures and the interactions and fusions among them would project an image of a field that seeks “native” cultural styles of writing, at a time when the cultural space of nations is increasingly disturbed by global forces, and fixed cultural-linguistic descriptions are better described as myths rather than realities (Kostogriz & Godley, 2007; Mauranen, 2001). The monolithic view of cultural writing styles promoted in contrastive rhetoric would further make it hard to imagine that students who come to L2 environments with “certain preferred traditions or practices of text construction of their own [. . .] can still creatively negotiate the alternate structures they are introduced to” (Canagarajah, 2002a, p. 64). To avoid such problematic categorizations and generalizations, Spack (1997b) went as far as

arguing that L2 writers should be perceived as autonomous individuals as opposed to members of a cultural group, and that the term culture should be abandoned altogether in studies of L2 writing.

On the other side of this debate, more recently Kaplan himself and other proponents of contrastive rhetoric have been writing extensively to admit that the early version of contrastive rhetoric was an oversimplified account of cultural influences which was unfortunately translated into practice in ways it was never meant to be (Connor, 2002; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Kaplan, 1987; Matsuda, 1997). They strongly believe, however, that dismissing the role of cultural, linguistic, and educational background of language learners in shaping their writings would be as naïve and problematic as cultural stereotyping. Following the lead of first language writing and composition studies as well as other areas of second language writing research (Belcher & Connor, 2001; Casanave, 2002; Clark & Ivanič, 1997; Cumming, 1998, 2002; Kroll, 2003; Matsuda, 2006), proponents of a new wave of contrastive rhetoric are now calling for broadening the scope, reexamining the underlying assumptions, and revisiting research methods of the field (Connor, 2002, 2004; Connor, Nagelhout, & Rozycki, 2008; Kaplan, 2005; Panetta, 2001). Sensitivity to the social context and the dynamics of the interaction between readers and writers through texts as well as the local situatedness and particularity of writing activity (Connor, 2002) is at the heart of what these researchers advocate as a new agenda for contrastive rhetoric. In terms of research methodology, they promote genre specific case studies and ethnographies of writing informed by the emic views of the writers - with no claims of generalizability - to provide descriptions of the experiences of ESL writers participating in acts of writing in different L2 contexts (Ramanathan &

Atkinson, 1999). This is in line with the shift of emphasis from cognitive processes to the social context in writing studies (Belcher & Braine, 1995; Fox, 1994; Rubin, 1995; Swales, 1990; Tucker, 1995).

In fact, the roots of the social approach to the analysis of written discourse can be traced to the earlier works of sociolinguists such as Hymes (1972), Labov (1972) and Heath (1982) on the ethnography of communication and analysis of oral discourse. What Hymes (1964) noted in his advocacy of ethnographies of communication could apply to studies of written discourse as well:

Just as there may be interference in the speech of bilinguals, or in the perception of those mastering another code, due to carryover of linguistic patterns already acquired, so there may be interference in the communicative conduct of bilinguals and newcomers to a community, due to carryover of sociolinguistic or communicative patterns already acquired. (p. 27)

Exploring the social aspect of language, the use of language in different communicative events, and the way language functions to create and reflect culture in social and ethnic groups are the concerns of sociolinguistics being adopted in the new ethnographies of second language writing. Following the lead of Athanases and Heath (1995) in educational research, Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) draw a line between ethnographies of communication and ethnographic studies of writing. The latter uses techniques such as observations and draws on multiple data sources to describe local, small-scale cultures such as schools and classrooms for pedagogical purposes. A key realization in ethnographies of writing has been that newcomers to writing communities do not arrive as blank slates, but bring with them their previous sociolinguistic

repertoires. Atkinson and Ramanathan's (1995) comparison of a freshman L1 composition program and an L2 writing program at the second language institute of a US university provides a holistic description of the two programs as cultural sites, and highlights the importance of understanding the different program cultures and their implications for students. Another ethnographic study of writing focusing on the experiences of students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in a particular social setting is the research of Angelova and Kiazantseva (1999). The study draws on qualitative data from multiple sources including interviews with graduate students and professors and class observations. The researchers try to demonstrate that four international ESL students have several problems in the process of adjusting to the requirements of their new academic programs in the US, rooted in their linguistic and cultural backgrounds and in the different rhetorical styles of academic writing in their first language(s) and English. While the research adopts an ethnographic and particularistic approach to the experiences of individual students with disciplinary writing, in discussing the results the authors seem to fall back on the same controversial generalizations about authoritative and collective cultures and the "difference equals difficulty" (Connor, 2008, p.303) attitudes that proponents of new cultural studies of writing are striving to distance themselves from.

Interestingly, it is not uncommon even among the new ethnographic studies of second language writing to make generalizations about groups of learners from particular linguistic backgrounds. For instance, Carson and Nelson (1995) explained the behavior of three Chinese students in a writing group in an advanced ESL composition classroom based on the mismatch between the U.S. individualist and the Asian collectivist cultures.

Similarly, in another microethnographic study of the perceptions of three Chinese and two Spanish students with regards to group work, Nelson and Carson (1998) videotaped peer response groups in which these students participated for six weeks, and conducted follow up interviews with the students about their activities. The researchers reported patterned differences in the views of Chinese and Spanish learners of English based on their small ethnographic study. Additionally, the conception that critical thinking, analytical writing, developing an individualized voice and challenging authority are not universal, but culture-specific characteristics of western traditions and, therefore, creating difficulties for non-western students is manifested in several other studies of cultures of writing (Jones, Turner, & Street, 1999; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996; Thatcher, 2005).

While as Connor (2004, 2008) suggests, a much-needed change is taking place in contrastive rhetoric research through adopting qualitative/interpretive ethnographies and case studies, this change seems to have occurred only at the level of research methodology. The theoretical, epistemological, and ideological underpinnings of contrastive rhetoric, however, continue to remain vague and unexamined to a great extent. As a result, both qualitative and quantitative rhetorical studies of writing conducted within this framework are still likely to fall back on unwarranted generalization at times, or in their attempt to avoid such generalized stereotypic assumptions, limit their analyses and interpretations of the social aspect of writing to what Pennycook refers to as “decontextualized context” (1994, p. 118). In other words, they tend to lose sight of the larger discursal, political, institutional and social forces as they focus on the local context of writing (Kubota, 2001).

In spite of all the controversies and shortcomings, contrastive rhetoric remains an established and viable field of writing research, perhaps because of its strong explanatory power and significant implications for practice (Petrić, 2005; Yakhontova, 2006). In her latest work, Ulla Connor, who has been an active researcher in the field of contrastive rhetoric for the past fifteen years, elaborates her vision for the expansion of contrastive rhetoric, and addresses the challenges posed by researching writing and rhetoric in a post-modern era (Connor, 2008). She expresses her disappointment over the fact that some critics speak of contrastive rhetoric “as if it has been frozen at the stage of Kaplan’s (1966) article” (p. 11). She proposes the term *intercultural rhetoric* to replace contrastive rhetoric in order to better reflect the inevitable interpersonal and intercultural influences that shape writing in different contexts, as well as the non-directional, multilayered understanding of the dynamic relationship between cultures and ways of writing. Connor encourages more polemic discussions of the issues she has raised in forums such as second language writing conferences and leading journals in the field.

The Social Turn in Writing Studies: From Writing to Situated Literacies

In line with the social turn in the philosophy of language, knowledge and learning (Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998), a social theory of writing starts with the assumption that writing is not an autonomous skill or competency, but an integral part of a social network of activities, relations, and interactions (Bazerman, 1988; Gee, 1996, 2000; Prior, 1998). One of the first indications of the influence of the social view of language on writing and composition research was the introduction of the term *discourse community* in the field (Bizzell, 1982). The concept refers to social groups of people sharing similar ideas, attitudes, values, and norms of behavior, who consequently agree

on certain conventions for using spoken and written language. Research addressing how such shared linguistic and rhetorical conventions of writing are learned in social contexts gave rise to a reconceptualization of the term genre in writing studies, which had traditionally been concerned with text types, formal features, or sets of textual regularities. The new conceptualization of genre shifted attention from regularities in texts to regularities in “human spheres of activity” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 62). In the new genre theory, characteristic features of social situations, the relationship and interaction among participants in such situations, as well as their goals and intended meanings are considered to be key to the construction of conventionalized forms of texts known as genres (Bazerman, 1988; Freedman & Medway, 1994; Kress, 1989; Miller, 1994; Swales, 1990). These genres constitute “part of the way people give shape to social activity” and demonstrate “recognizable structural identity” (Hyland, 2002b, p.317). Genre studies have had a considerable impact on writing and literacy research for the past two decades. Most significantly, the pioneering research of Swales (1990) in analyzing the structure of research articles from numerous academic disciplines led to establishing certain “communicative moves” within a highly common genre in academic contexts. Swales proposed a model for the introduction section of research articles, which he called CARS (Create-A-Research-Space). In essence, his model suggested that research articles begin with a move that establishes a territory, or a general topic for discussion. The authors then create a niche for themselves within that territory through raising questions, identifying a gap, continuing a tradition, or putting forward a counter claim. They finally occupy that niche through outlining the purpose, announcing the present research, announcing the major findings or indicating the article structure. The seminal work of

Swales in academic writing along with the equally important research of Bhatia (1993, 1999) in professional or workplace writing have inspired many socially informed and context-specific genre studies with significant implications for language education.

Furthermore, cultural studies of writing reviewed in the previous section under the rubric of contrastive rhetoric have long explored generic variations in texts across languages and cultures. Examples include comparing letters of recommendation written in the United States, England, Germany, and Eastern Europe (Precht, 1998), grant proposals written in English and Spanish (Connor & Wagner, 1999), structural moves in sales letters written in English and Chinese (Zhu, 2000), and fundraising letters written in the US, Germany, Finland, Japan and Mexico (Connor, 2002).

Researchers in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) tradition have long been interested in genre studies as a tool for teaching disciplinary or professional writing to first and second language learners, and have focused much of their attention on translating the findings of this line of research into academic text books and other pedagogical materials (Bhatia, 1999, 2004; Johns, 1997; Johns & Swales, 2002; Sullivan & Gerginer, 2002; Swales & Feak, 2004). While genre studies have impacted current understanding of social languages and language education in many ways, some major concerns about genre analysis have been addressed in several research studies in recent years. One is the variations among the disciplinary genres, which make it virtually impossible to speak of a unified genre such as research article among different academic disciplines. Holmes (1997), for instance, analyzed the discussion section of thirty research articles in three different disciplines within social sciences and humanities including history, political science, and sociology. He found out that while there were

some fundamental similarities among the texts, each of the disciplines displayed some distinctive version of the moves originally identified by Swales (1990). Similarly, Samraj's (2002) analysis of twelve randomly selected research articles published in key refereed journals in the two related fields of Wildlife Behavior and Conservation Biology (both subdisciplines of Environmental Studies) revealed variations in the structure of these genres. Samraj concluded from his research that more embeddedness in specific contexts is required in analytical genre studies to avoid overgeneralizations. He also suggested that the borders between the moves initially proposed by Swales were not always identifiable in a clear manner, and there were some notable differences between the articles in the two fields under study with regards to the moves.

A second problem has to do with the pedagogical approach adopted by proponents of ESP, and a branch of genre studies commonly known in North America as the Sydney School, which is mainly based on the theoretical work of M. A. K. Halliday (1994) in systemic functional linguistics. This orientation stresses the social purposes of genres as goal oriented constructs with schematic structures that can be systematically described and incorporated into language education. From this perspective, explicit teaching of genres to students empowers them through facilitating their access to dominant discourses. However, the basic assumption that students are more likely to succeed if the genres of power are made visible and accessible to them is deemed ideologically questionable, no matter how well intentioned it might be, by some critics (Belcher, 2006; Benesch, 2001a). They argue that the idea of explicit teaching of dominant genres as preferred ways of writing buys into the value and the prestige assigned to powerful genres, while students' own writings are too often discredited as

diverging from acceptability criteria and “failed attempts to approximate prestigious forms” (Hyland, 2002a, p.125).

Yet another concern has to do with the nature of social groups or discourse communities with which genres are identified. A broader understanding of the dynamics of participant interaction and involvement in the activities of social groups has been making its way into writing research. Social groups are believed to be in a constant state of flux as their borders can be fuzzy and their members might be participating in several other social groups simultaneously. This makes the boundaries between social groups and their respective genres best described as *blurred* (Geertz, 1983). Proponents of genre studies increasingly admit that there is a constant tension between stabilizing and destabilizing social relations, which make genres only stabilized-for-now constructs that while repeated, are constantly revised in their social contexts (Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1991; Prior, 1998; Swales, 1998). Consequently, the notion of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) has been adopted as a replacement for discourse communities in order to alleviate the rigidity associated with the term. Communities of practice also seem to better account for yet another dimension of social interaction: rather than perceiving novices entering certain predefined communities and gradually acquiring the existing conventions, a theory of socialization into a community of practice would account for the fact that newcomers are as active participants in the construction of the group as the old-timers. In other words, all participants are engaged in a process of both co-operation and co-construction of the social realities, conventions, and practices of communities (Prior, 1998).

This conceptualization of participation in communities of practice, along with other congruent theoretical underpinnings (further discussed in the theoretical framework of the present study) became the starting point of a line of research labeled New Literacy Studies (Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; B. Street, 1995). Gee (2000) identifies the New Literacy Studies as a movement among several other discernable ones that have collectively made up the social turn in understanding knowledge, language, and education. These studies conceive of literacies (in the plural) as a social practices, or particular ways of thinking about and engaging in reading and writing activities in social groups (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). These practices involve people's situated values, attitudes, feelings, and social relations at two interrelated contextual levels: the local context, or what Halliday (1994) refers to as context of situation, and the broader social and discoursal context (Ivanič, 1998, 2004), or context of culture (Halliday, 1994). A growing interest in the perspectives of participants, their understandings of the literacy practices they engage in, and their use of the relevant artifacts in various professional, academic, or other communities of practice characterize New Literacy Studies.

It is within this framework that studies of academic writing as a situated literacy practice, also referred to as Academic Literacies research have flourished (Bazerman, 2004; Bazerman & Prior, 2004; Candlin & Plum, 1999; Casanave, 2002; Hewings, 2001; Hyland, 2002a; Lea & Street, 1999; Leander & Prior, 2004; Lillis, 2001; Prior, 1994, 1995). In this line of research, ethnographic accounts of the experiences of individuals (both L1 and L2 speakers of English) with academic writing in different contexts are provided, the challenges of engaging in various academic literacy practices are explored, and the tensions resulting from unequal power relations in the context of academic

institutions are uncovered. In a series of ethnographies and case studies of graduate student development in disciplines such as Applied Linguistics, Sociology, Geography, and American Studies, Prior (1994, 1995, 2004) incorporated contextual influences and insights of the writers into his analysis of their literacy practices. He looked at the interactions of people, artifacts, institutions, and practices to analyze academic literate activity over time, and to understand how acts of writing were negotiated in graduate seminars. Prior's analyses highlight the multiple and often conflicting motives and goals of graduate students, and the way their personal histories play into the emergent and discursively heterogeneous practices of disciplinary sense-making (Prior, 2004). He contends that a key aspect of a socially informed study of writing is relating texts to other texts (tracing intertextuality), to their interaction with their readers, and to the writers' own accounts of their experiences with writing activities. Yet another line of disciplinary literacy studies adopt a socio-cognitive approach to acquiring literacy. Riazi (1998), for instance, investigated the texts of four Iranian doctoral students studying at a Canadian college of education. Using a naturalistic approach, he followed the students through their graduate seminars for a period of five months, collecting data from multiple sources such as questionnaires, interviews, written papers, course documents and process logs. He provided a detailed account of how the participant relied on a variety of cognitive, meta-cognitive, and social interaction strategies to complete their disciplinary writing tasks. He also pointed out that unfamiliarity with the rhetorical conventions of their field was more debilitating for these graduate students than their English proficiency level.

Among the socio-politically oriented understandings of situated literacies, one of the compelling conceptualizations is offered by Casanave (2002). Borrowing the

metaphor of *language games* from Wittgenstein (1953), she describes the literacy practices in higher education as writing games. The game metaphor implies that academic writing is based on rules and strategies that are learned through repeated practice, and are negotiable among the participating players. Through multicultural case studies of individuals participating in academic communities at different levels (undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty members), Casanave focuses on “the local and individual details of the lived experiences” of those who have mastered and control the rules of the game, as well as those whose practices “do not readily fit the broader pattern” in academic institutions (p.15). She, among others, argues that due to issues of power, resistance, legitimacy, interest and control over the rules of the game, the stakes can be very high for the players, especially for members of the traditionally marginalized and non-dominant genders, ethnic, racial and cultural minorities, as well as ESL students and faculty members (Cummins, 1996; Kirsch, 1993; Norton, 2000; Peirce, 1995; Pennycook, 1994).

Among the academic literacy studies that concentrate on second language writers’ practices is the work of Curry and Lillis (2004). In an ethnographic study of the publishing practices of sixteen psychology scholars from Hungary, Slovakia, and Spain, the researchers took a close look at how scholars living and working outside the English speaking world negotiated the academic and professional demands for publishing in international English journals. In a follow up research, Lillis and Curry (2006) explored the significant role of mediators, or in their words, “literacy brokers” such as more experienced scholars and journal reviewers in the production and publication of the English texts of these scholars. Through interviews with the scholars, group discussions,

text-oriented ethnographic accounts of the context of writing, the history of the texts, the writing processes and practices, and the interactions with publishing gatekeepers, these two studies provide compelling accounts of the literacy experiences of a large group of second language scholars and their literacy practices.

The New Literacies perspective has also impacted studies that mainly concentrate on the analysis of written discourse, since texts comprise one of the three major analytical levels (practices, events, texts) within the framework (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). In the introduction to their edited volume on analyzing texts and textual practices, Bazerman and Prior (2004) highlight the importance of asking questions in discourse analysis that are concerned with “what texts do and how texts mean rather than what they mean.” (p. 3).

In keeping with this view, Selzer (2004) promotes applying context-sensitive approaches to studies of the rhetorical structure of texts. He refers to two approaches to the analysis of the structure of written texts: textual, and contextual rhetorical analysis. While textual analysis merely focuses on the isolated text and tries to uncover the tactics used by the writer to achieve various rhetorical purposes in the text, contextual rhetorical analysis seeks to explore “how the particular pieces of a rhetorical performance emerge from, are owing to, and speak to specific contexts” (p. 292). Contextual rhetorical analysis resists the notion of bounded text; it appreciates how texts are shaped by the attitudes and values of communities and their social practices, and searches for the evidence of how social practices are reflected in texts. Selzer argues, nonetheless, that textual and contextual approaches to the study of rhetoric are by no means mutually exclusive. They rather complement each other as “specific rhetorical performances are an

irreducible mixture of text and context, and so interpretation and analysis of those performances must account for both as well” (p. 302). One such rhetorical performance that has been of great interest to academic writing researchers is the structure of written argument, which will be discussed next.

Studies of Argumentation in L2 Academic Writing Research

Because of the centrality of reasoning and argumentation in academic discourse, many studies of academic writing address the question of what counts as an effective and convincing argument, what kind of rules dominate the structure and organization of an argument and how individuals learn these rules (Belcher, 1997; Kaufer & Geisler, 1991; Medway, 1989; Mitchell & Andrews, 2000). Traditionally, the approach taken up in research on the structure of argument composition studies has been textually oriented. Kaufer and Geisler (1991), for instance, provided a rhetorical model of what happens in the course of constructing an academic argumentative essay. They suggested that in an effort to create a rhetorical space for their own argument, academic writers tend to position themselves in opposition to the assumptions of an existing argument. Through a descriptive model of the faulty paths and the return paths that a writer might adopt in the process, Kaufer and Geisler demonstrated how writers navigate their way throughout the essay to create the main path, or their main line of argument.

It is to be noted that within genre studies reviewed earlier in this chapter, argumentation, along with narration, description, exposition, and evaluation is considered to be a macro-genre (Bhatia, 2002, 2004), or a text-type (Biber, 1988; Grabe, 2002). In this categorization, genres are characterized on the basis of external criteria such as being

written for a particular audience, in a particular context, and with a particular purpose. Text-types or macro-genres, on the other hand, represent a higher level of description, and are supposedly similar in terms of the discourse patterns irrespective of the context of writing. They are considered as higher level categories which genres fall within. In this sense, research reports, term papers, lectures, and newspaper editorials are genres that might represent text types such as problem/solution, exposition, or argumentation. Nevertheless, the contention that argumentation as a text-type is not dependant on external criteria is open to question. In his complex and multifaceted work on reasoning and argumentation, the British philosopher Stephen Toulmin (1964/2003) speaks of argumentation as a field dependant matter. Toulmin has developed one of the most widely known analyses of argumentation in particular contexts or fields, and a classical descriptive framework for the structure of arguments. Toulmin's theoretical position will be further discussed as one of the perspectives informing the present study in the next chapter.

Insights from Toulmin's theory have resulted in composition studies that explore the context-specific nature of argumentation and the epistemological source of argument as a social practice in different generic contexts (Candlin & Plum, 1999; Freedman & Medway, 1994). One recent study that focuses on how Toulmin's model should be interpreted with a particular context in mind is the research of Lunsford (2002). Lunsford's case study is conducted within a six week writing course offered to ten senior high school students over a summer at a university in the US, with the aim of evaluating some new teaching techniques and college level writing textbooks. Lunsford problematizes the typical use of Toulmin's theory of argumentation in the writing

classroom, which consists of evaluating the extent of the alignment of students' essays with the model's components, construed as objective criteria. Lunsford contends that this common treatment of the model in writing classes undermines Toulmin's view that the gauging of the soundness of an argument is a field dependant matter. The fact that a controversy arises in the writing class when participants try to identify the main claim of a student's essay indicates, according to Lunsford, that even the assumed correspondence between the claim and the thesis statement of an essay is not always straightforward and has to be negotiated among the participants. She also provides an account of the difficulties associated with creating projected contexts in the writing classroom, i.e., hypothetical audiences, contexts, and purposes to motivate student writing, also a very common practice in academic writing courses.

Within second language writing studies, research on argumentation has mainly focused on the organizational problems in the structure of the writings of ESL students. Poor organization, lack of coherence, stylistic inappropriateness and too many digressions from a linear development of the main arguments are common descriptions of L2 texts in many studies of writing (Connor, 1990; Ferris, 1994; Hirose, 2003; Keiko, 2003). Most of these studies are text analytical and comparative, in which large sets of data from L1 and L2 texts are compared through frequency counts and other statistical techniques. Hirose (2003), for instance, compared the organizational pattern of L1 and L2 texts written by the fifteen Japanese students majoring in American and British studies at a Japanese university. Each student wrote an essay in Japanese and one in English, and the texts in each language were rated by three L1 content area professors. Among other findings, quantitative analysis of the data suggested that students used more deductive

organizational patterns in their English writings compared to their Japanese writings. Furthermore, in terms of the text organization and text development, which were operationally defined through criteria such as the location of the main idea, degree of appeal to reader, presence and absence of summary statements, etc., the L2 texts differed significantly from the L1 texts.

In terms of the unit of analysis, many L2 writing studies such as the one mentioned above draw on descriptive frameworks developed for the English language, among which is Toulmin's model of argumentation structure (Connor, 1990; Ferris, 1994). What is interesting, however, is that these analytical studies tend to adopt the rather mechanical and superficial aspect of the theory, that is, the elements which Toulmin identifies as components of an argument, with little attention to the more essential aspect of his philosophy of the socially constructed nature of these rhetorical features. Such quantitative, decontextualized applications of Toulmin's theory to the analysis of L2 texts have resulted in misleading generalizations about the linguistic and rhetorical deficits that ESL students bring into their English argumentative writings, much in line with the highly contested mainstream contrastive rhetoric research.

Summary

In their comprehensive synthesis of research on second language writing in English, Leki, Cumming and Silva (2008) refer to the field of L2 writing as one that has rapidly evolved since 1980s and continues to do so, as evidenced by a growing number of journals, books, conferences and symposia exclusively devoted to L2 writing research and scholarship. This field of inquiry has generated diverse subfields and areas of specialty, of which contrastive rhetoric is arguably a controversial strand (Connor, 2004;

Kaplan, 2005; Leki, 2002). The studies reviewed in this chapter point to the significant contribution of contrastive rhetoric to our understanding of the unique features of texts produced by second language writers from different language backgrounds across various academic and workplace genres. Contrastive rhetoric has, in many ways, added any eye-opening dimension to second language pedagogy for both learners and instructors through drawing attention to the inherently distinct characteristics of first and second language writing. At the same time, a large number of studies conducted within this framework have been subject to criticism because of their culturally deterministic interpretations, static representations of texts, and the socio-politically questionable projection of L2 writers' texts as deviating from the norms and standards expected by their L1 English readers.

I find the recent call in the field of contrastive rhetoric to move away from making hypothetical assumptions and unwarranted assertions about the impact of first language and culture on second language writing (Atkinson, 2004; Connor, 2004) to be a significant step that is compatible with the principles informing other areas of second language writing and literacy research. While there is an increasing attention to disciplinary writing at the graduate level, a great number of studies of writing and literacy in social contexts have focused on undergraduate academic writing. Earlier research focused on the one-way initiation of student writers into the generic conventions of their discourse communities (Bizzell, 1982), yet more recent studies are informed by a more sophisticated understanding of the social interactions in communities of practice, the active role of new participants in shaping these communities, and the negotiation of social roles in various disciplinary contexts (Casanave, 2002; Hyland, 2004; Prior, 1998;

Tardy, 2005). In the New Literacy Studies, some of which were reviewed in this chapter, students' own detailed accounts of their writing experiences, and the dynamics of the interaction of participants, artifacts and institutions are explored in longitudinal case studies and ethnographies of writing. Considering the central role that reasoning and argumentation plays in the literate activity that international graduate students engage in throughout their North American educational experience, this area of writing research was also reviewed in the present chapter. Many of these studies have been conducted from a contrastive rhetoric perspective. As insightful as they are about the potential differences between argumentative texts in different languages, they have mainly focused on the organizational problems, digressions from a linear development of the main argument, and lack of coherence in the English academic writings of L2 students. Informing cultural studies of argumentation in L2 writing with the perspectives of literacy research would make a connection between these research areas that can fill some of the knowledge gaps in our current understanding of L2 writing.

The next chapter delineates the theoretical perspectives underlying the present research. Some of the theoretical insights informing this inquiry are part of the underlying assumptions of a number of the studies reviewed here. Therefore, there will be inevitable overlaps between the theories already mentioned to foreground the research areas reviewed, and the theoretical positioning which will be presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Theoretical Positioning

One of the goals of the present study is to make a contribution to the current conversation in the field of intercultural rhetoric around the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of this line of writing research. To this end, I have theoretically positioned this study within a framework that I believe can serve an expanded conception of writing as a social construct in cultural studies of second language writing. The framework draws on key ideas from interrelated social theories of language, learning and literacy. My starting point within the theoretical positions informing this inquiry is Bakhtin's (1986) social theory of language. I draw on Bakhtin's notion of dialogicality as well as Lotman's (1990/ 2001) closely associated conception of texts as semiotic spaces for dialogic interaction. Together these concepts provide a basis for viewing second language writers' texts as the nexus of interaction between writers and readers. This, in turn, is one of the underpinnings of a social theory of writing as a literacy practice (Gee, 2000; Ivanič, 2004; Lea & Street, 1999), which further informs this inquiry. A social theory of literacy foregrounds the cultural, political, and institutional contexts within which acts of writing take place, and locates literacy in the interactions among people in such contexts. The question of whose literacies are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant (Street, 2004) is a key concern in critical literacy and language education research. Along this line, I will also draw upon the notion of contact zone proposed by Mary Louise Pratt (1991) to conceptualize second language writers' texts as the point where the perceptions of student writers and the expectations of their audience, shaped by the dominant literacy practices, meet. Finally, Toulmin's theory of argumentation as a

social construct provides an analytical heuristic for understanding the rhetorical decisions and textual practices of students in their argumentative writings.

A Social Theory of Language: Text as Semiotic Space for Dialogic Interaction

The ideas of Michael H. Bakhtin have already permeated academic fields far beyond philosophy and literary theory studies, receiving critical attention in various areas of social inquiry including language literacy and education. Nonetheless, their impact on second and foreign language learning research has been less prominent, perhaps due to the dominance of cognitive psychology and structural linguistics that view language as an abstract, self-contained system of fixed structural components. This said, however, as part of a new direction in some strands of Applied Linguistics, Bakhtin's ideas seem to be making their way into the field in recent years (Wertsch, 2006). One of the key elements in Bakhtin's social theory of language with direct implications for second language writing research is the notion of dialogicality (Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1991). From a Bakhtinian perspective, all language - and all thought for that matter - occurs in response to what precedes and in anticipation of what will follow. Wertsch (2006) holds that the Russian term for the key concept of "utterance" in Bakhtin's work on dialogicality can be also translated as "text". For Bakhtin (1986), the act of uttering or generating text always involves the other, and is "filled with dialogic overtones" (p. 91). In an insightful take on advanced foreign language learning, Wertsch (2006) emphasizes that in discussions of language learning, the Bakhtinian concept of dialogue is to be understood at a second level beyond the immediate and localized communication of interlocutors, in reference to a "generalized collective dialogue" (p. 58). In other words, learners of a language, in addition to mastering the systems of sound, grammar and meaning, also need to become

part of an extended society-wide dialogue and a chain of texts in the community in order to be engaged in its conversations. The nature of the collective dialogue may not be obvious to outsiders, and accordingly, a language learner's text might be "organized in response to the perspective of another collective with a different generalized voice" (p. 68). This view has direct implications for the present study, as the rhetorical ways of meaning (Bakhtin, 1986) that second language writers bring into acts of writing in their disciplinary communities might belong to other collective dialogues.

Closely associated with the notion of dialogicality is Lotman's conception of text as a site or sphere for interaction. Through bringing the dynamics of power into the equation, Lotman speaks of the functional dualism of texts as monologic and dialogic in semiotic interactions. In a monologic or univocal treatment, certain textual features shared by a community are elevated to the status of canonical, participants are encouraged to comply with their structure, and their performance is evaluated in terms of consistency with these socially upheld patterns of textual performance (Lotman, 1988; Wertsch, 1991). In contrast, in a dialogic function, texts are understood as sites for interaction and interanimation (Bakhtin, 1986) between the participant-interlocutors. Knowledge of the semiotic codes or the social languages of a new community comes about through the process of generating meaning and actively participating in group interactions. Significantly, the differences between the language of the sender and the receiver (i.e., the reader and the writer) can be understood as differences in ways of meaning rather than imperfections, as they are "the very essence of a text's function as a 'thinking device'" in the dialogic function (Wertsch, 1991, p. 74). In Lotman's view the monologic and dialogic functions of texts are not mutually exclusive, yet one can be

dominant over the other in certain sociocultural settings and in certain periods of history, with direct implications for the participants in social interaction. Lotman and Uspensky (1978) conceive of languages as being immersed in socio-historical processes in the context of culture, and explain:

A key question is the relationship of culture to natural language.... [I]t would be appropriate to stress here that in their actual historical functioning, languages are inseparable from culture. No language (in the full sense of the word) can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have, as its center, the structure of natural language. (p. 212)

For Lotman, semiotic systems function in the context as relative rather than absolute autonomous structures. For this reason, what is perceived as text in one culture may not be a text in a different cultural context. The notion of semiotic space or *semiosphere*, while locating texts in historical and cultural contexts, allows for internal heterogeneity of social and national languages in the cultural context. I draw on this perspective to offer a different conceptualization of culture in contrastive rhetoric (Atkinson, 2004) that gives rise to an image of texts as dynamic rather than static cultural artifacts.

A Social Theory of Literacy: Academic Writing as Literacy Practice

Another theoretical perspective informing the present study is the theory of literacy as social practice associated with New Literacy Studies (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Gee, 1996; Larson, 1996), an influential movement in language and literacy research that highlights the social, cultural and contextual nature of literacy learning. This

literacy theory is, in fact, part of the social turn and the shifting focus across many disciplines from the individual behavior to social interaction. As Gee (2000) points out, the movement is greatly influenced by sociocultural theory, activity theory, post-structural theories of discourse and identity, and Bakhtin's work on social languages, among other perspective. The notion of social literacies signals the concern of this theory with the range of social and cultural practices around reading and writing varying according to time and space, as opposed to understanding reading and writing as unified cognitive skills transcending contexts. Barton and Hamilton (2000) suggest that the word practice in this perspective refers to cultural ways of utilizing artifacts such as written texts in social institutions. Practices can thus be understood as different ways of belonging, acting, and interacting in social groups, and they involve people's situated values, attitudes, and social relations at the two interrelated levels of the local context and the broader social and discoursal context (Ivanič, 1998). Proponents of the conceptualization of writing as a situated social practice believe that if a theory of writing does not encompass the practices around the production, reception, interpretation and evaluation of the written text at both these levels, it actually misses "the core of the text's being" (Bazerman & Russel, 2002, p.1). The work on "academic literacies" (Bazerman & Prior, 2004; Casanave, 2002; Lea & Street, 1999; Lillis, 2003) is one direction in this broader framework, which understands reading, writing, meaning making, and identity construction in academic institutions in relation to the dominant ideologies and power relations which sustain them (Ivanič, 1998; Lea & Street, 2006; Street, 2004). From this perspective, writing papers in the disciplines can be understood as a major aspect of the literacy practices that graduate students engage in. Locating the literacy practices of

second language writers within the institutional context gives rise to yet another theoretical component of the present study, namely a critical perspective on the early encounter experiences of L2 students in academic contact zones.

Critical Academic Literacy: Academic Contact Zones and Safe Houses

The notion of contact zone, originally defined by Mary Louise Pratt as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1991, p. 34), has been adopted in composition and writing studies with postcolonial inclinations (Olson, 1999). From a critical perspective, all human interactions by definition entail encounter experiences with the “other” and because everyone brings to this interaction their own agendas, needs, and interests which might be in conflict with those of others, initial encounter experiences turn out to involve some tension, particularly in the context of unequal power relations. Pratt points out that the stressful atmosphere of the contact zone makes everyone, particularly members of the less powerful and marginalized groups, appreciate the importance of safe houses, which she defines as “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings and temporary protection’ (p. 40)”. I find this notion a particularly useful way of conceptualizing the dynamics of the interactions of L2 student writers with their newly adopted academic disciplines. Specifically, this perspective provides insight into how these students’ relations in academic contexts are instantiated in a focused domain of interaction such as the responses that their writings elicit from their professors, peers, and writing tutors.

A Social Theory of Reasoning: Argumentation as a Social Construct

Toulmin's theory of argumentation provides a socially informed understanding of argumentation asserting that the nature of "the reasonable" and the way it is represented might vary in different communities and social institutions (Toulmin, 1964/2003; Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1984). Although Toulmin is primarily concerned with social languages rather than national languages, it would be interesting to explore the writings of students from other linguistic backgrounds in light of a dynamic and situated interpretation of his theory (Lunsford, 2002) informed by the views of the writers and their readers as they engage in argumentative writing in higher education.

In analytical models of argumentation concerned with text structure, a significant element is believed to be the structural organization, or the arrangement of the argument (Mitchell & Andrews, 2000; Selzer, 2004). As a philosopher and logician, Toulmin has developed one of the most widely known analyses of this aspect of argumentation in particular contexts or fields. In his classical descriptive framework, Toulmin (1964/2003) specifies certain elements as the component units of an argument. Toulmin, Rieke, and Janik (1984) define argumentation as putting forward an assertion for public acceptance, and offering a set of supporting reasons by which one can explain or justify that claim or position. They point to six major elements potentially present in every argument in different social contexts: the *claim*, which is the assertion put forward for acceptance, the *grounds*, which are the specific facts that are relied on to support the given claim, and the *warrant*, which is the concept or principle that enables you to use the grounds in support of a claim. The warrant, in other words, indicates if the move from the grounds to the claim is justifiable and if there is a logical and acceptable link between the two. The

fourth component is *backing*, which is the assurance that the warrant is both trustworthy and relevant in a particular situation. It provides further support for the argument. An example can be backing up the argument in an academic paper with literature review or supportive evidence from previous research. Next is the *modal qualifier*, which indicates the degree of certainty and the conditions of the validity of the argument. Finally, there is the *possible rebuttal*, which presents the counter-arguments out there and the factors and possibilities that might upset the argument put forward (for a visual representation of the components see *Appendix A*).

What makes Toulmin's work particularly interesting in current studies of argumentative writing is the position that what counts as appropriate argument and convincing reasoning might vary according to historical, disciplinary, and social context (Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1984). Toulmin (1964/2003) believes that each social context constructs a rhetorical version of rationality not necessarily applicable to other contexts. In fact, Toulmin's model of argumentation is a realization of the interwoven nature of the rhetorical structure of the text and the context of writing. It powerfully demonstrates how social circumstances call for certain rhetorical arrangements in an argument, and orchestrate the way it should proceed in the text. As it was pointed out in the literature review, cultural studies of second language writing have traditionally been drawing on Toulmin's work through mapping L2 texts on the components of the model. These textual analyses have lead to generalized assertions as to the existence of language and culture specific patterns of argumentation. In the present study, however, Toulmin's work will only provide a heuristic device for making sense of the writer' textual decisions as they engage in situated acts of writing in higher education.

Gaps in the Literature and Rationale for the Study

The common thread in all of the above theoretical perspectives is their focus on the situatedness of human activity and the primacy of context in interpretive inquiries into human interactions. Weaving together insights from these theoretical perspectives, the study aims to address a perceived gap that emerged from the review of the literature. Specifically, the literature review revealed that current cultural studies of L2 academic writing that focus on patterns of reasoning and argumentation are generally uninformed by the social turn in the philosophy of language, and the current socially informed approaches to writing and literacy research. On the other hand, few of the growing number of studies of second language writing and literacy in graduate school draw the significant cultural perspective that contrastive rhetoric has to offer. In an attempt to bring together insights from both perspectives, and in light of a recent call in the field of contrastive rhetoric to broaden the scope and re-examine the underlying assumption of this research area, this inquiry aims to highlight the possibilities that research into the intersection of social languages, literacies and writing cultures can afford.

Research Questions

Prompted by the perceived gap in the literature, the following general questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do Iranian ESL graduate students perceive and understand academic writing in North American graduate schools?
2. How is this understanding realized in their texts, textual practices, and interactions with their audiences within the context of writing?

3. How do L2 student writers understand the evaluation criteria outlined by their professors and the responses that their texts elicit from the readers/evaluators? To what extent are they able to benefit from the feedback provided on their writings?

Relevant to these central questions, the research focused on the Iranian graduate students' attitudes toward and perceptions of academic writing and argumentation in the context of their disciplinary areas, and the socio-historic literacy experiences that they brought into their writing activities in North American universities. Of interest was the way these experiences, attitudes and perceptions shaped the students' textual practices, as well as the similarities and/or differences between their existing practices and those dominant in the disciplinary discourses. Furthermore, the research would explore interactions between the students and their professors around the written texts, and how acts of writing were mediated through conversations around the text or written feedback. Meanwhile, stories of the L2 students' early encounter experiences in academic contact zones would provide insight into their socialization experiences in North American institutions of higher education.

To investigate second language writers' texts and textual practices as they naturally engaged in disciplinary writing (Heath & Street, 2008), the study adopted a logic of inquiry congruent with its underlying theoretical perspectives, which will be presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology of the study. It includes my epistemological stance and value orientation, the rationale for the choice of the method of inquiry, and a detailed description of the context of study, research participants, data sources and data collection procedure, as well as the analytical heuristic informing the interpretation of the data. I will also reflect on some of the unique dimensions of this cross-cultural inquiry as a researcher and a second language writer who shares many of the experiences of first language literacy and schooling that the students in this study have lived.

Researcher's Stance

I firmly believe that all research is value-laden. That is, my own life history, values, attitudes and perceptions are embedded in what I have selected to research, how to research it, and how to represent the findings. Further, in researching an activity as complex and intricate as writing, one has to acknowledge that texts, whether those being researched or the reports produced by researchers, are reflections of the writers' state of knowledge and experience (Emig, 1982; Flower, 1994; Mishler, 1996). I am aware that throughout the process of conducting this study and constructing its report, my own subjectivity as an insider to the first language and literacy experiences of the participants has served to foreground certain interpretations and sent others to the background. At the same time, in keeping with the principles of a constructivist paradigm (Bruner, 1996; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Connelly, 1990), I believe it is on the basis of these very subjectivities and experiences that researchers, along with research participants, make

sense of the worlds they inhabit. For this reason, rather than construing my personal experiences and subject positioning as threats to validity that need to be bracketed out, in this study I treat them as the “essential element of understanding” (Stake, 1995, p. 45). As the primary instrument of research (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delmont, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Eisner, 1998; Patten, 1990) my values and assumptions have shaped different aspects of study design, data collection, analysis and presentation, and I have mediated all meaning in this inquiry (Merriam, 2001). At the same time, I have all along been committed to a research process that strives to capture the meaning of participants’ actions and decisions from their own point of view (Lather, 1991). I have also been aligned with a view of research that regards it as a dialogic exchange and collaborative partnership between the researcher and the research participants. Throughout this inquiry, the role of the participants has been much more than mere informants, partly because of my stance with regards to research, and partly because of our particular relationship as peer graduate students, colleagues and “Iranians in North America”. We frequently had lengthy conversations about our common life and education experiences throughout the process, and they openly and generously contributed to the study by sharing their insights and comments on my analysis. Even as I am drafting the report of the research months after these conversations, I sometimes receive emails or phone calls from some of the participants telling me things they forgot to say, sharing a new experience, or just wanting to have a conversation with me about a dimension of their writing that they have become sensitized to thanks to their participation in this study. One of the participants, for instance, recently sent me a short article in Persian by her roommate, published in a well-known online journal focused on women’s rights in Iran. This research participant

had asked her friend to reflect on the process of constructing her text and developing her argument, and was told by the author that had she been writing the same article in English, she would have approached it differently. The participant, quite excited about the conversation with her roommate on the writing process, called me up to say that she would send me the piece along with some notes from the author the next day. The participants in this study on more than one occasion remarked that their participation in this research project had assisted them in making sense of their experience with writing in graduate school, enlightened them on aspects of writing that they had never previously thought of, and helped them understand why certain writing practices often elicited negative feedback from their professors.

Such encouraging responses that I obtained from the participants at some level speak to the question of judging the quality of qualitative research. While the twin concepts of validity and reliability and their equivalents in qualitative research including trustworthiness, transferability and dependability have long been seriously questioned on account of unwarranted assumptions of stable social realities (Eisner, 1998; Richardson, 2000a; Schwandt, 2000; Wolcott, 1994), they continue to be commonly used and advocated among second language researchers as evaluative criteria for qualitative inquiry (Bailey & Nunan, 1996; Casanave, 2003; Mackey & Gass, 2005; McCarthy & Garcia, 2005). In line with more recent discussions in qualitative research communities, I take the position that as a researcher I am first and foremost driven by crafting an account of the inquiry that is reflexive and invites an interpretive response from my readers (Flick, Kardorff, & Steinke, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Richardson, 2000a, 2000b). At the same time, while aware of the limitations of triangulation as a heuristic device (Flick,

Kardorff, & Steinke, 2004) I have decided to build in this commonly used strategy in order to address questions around the credibility of the research report (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delmont, 2003). The aim, of course, is not to imply that there are fixed realities or objective knowledge claims that can be arrived at through looking from different “angles”, but merely to offer multiple grounds for the interpretations presented. To this end, I have triangulated the findings across data sets, incorporated multiple theoretical perspectives for analysis and interpretation, shared the transcripts and the emerging themes with the participants and tried to verify my analysis against their feedback (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Pardoe, 2000).

The Study

In an attempt to move beyond the dominance of cognitive science and post-positivist research paradigms in applied linguistics, researchers in the field are increasingly calling for situated ethnographic/qualitative studies and a greater awareness of the perspectival and constructed nature of knowledge (Leki, 2000; McGroarty, 1998; Parks, 2005). Similar calls have been made in the field of cultural and rhetorical studies of second language writing for a move away from the current-traditional approaches toward situated understandings (Atkinson, 2005; Belcher, 2006; Connor, 2004; Connor, Nagelhout, & Rozycki, 2008; Matsuda, 2002; Mauranen, 2001). Against this background, the present research set out to explore the experiences of ESL graduate students with argumentative writing in North American universities through adopting a qualitative approach to studying their texts and textual practices. My intent has been to offer an alternative understanding of second language writers’ texts as socially embedded

artifacts, and to bring to the fore the experiences of individual ESL writers as they naturally engage in their disciplinary literacy practice (Heath & Street, 2008).

Multiple Case Study Design

The research comprised a set of interpretive and inter-related case studies. The “particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic” (Merriam, 2001, p.29) character of these case studies helped me better understand each experience in its own particularities, and enabled me to focus on the meaning in context (Merriam, 2001; Mishler, 1979). More specifically, the meaning of the writing activity for the participating second language writers and their unique experiences within the local context of disciplinary writing as well as the broader institutional context was the focus in each particular case. At the same time, commonalities in the participants’ national, linguistic, and educational backgrounds as well as similarities in their experiences of socialization into new academic contexts called for cross-case comparisons. A multiple case study approach (Merriam, 2001; Stake, 2000) was adopted, and holistic cross-case analyses were conducted for interpreting and making sense of the data (Merriam & Simpson, 1995; Yin, 1994). The study was, of course, focused on understanding the past and present literacy experiences of the participants and the texts they produced rather than on the individuals themselves. This is reflected in the research report, as rather than presenting the findings on a case by case basis, the individual students are introduced in the methodology chapter through descriptive vignettes. The findings presented in the following chapters are categorized in terms of the common themes and textual practices observed across the multiple cases.

Context of the Study and the Participants

The study was conducted within the disciplinary context of graduate degree programs in Humanities and Social Sciences in North American universities, where argumentative writing is believed to be at the heart of the literacy practices that students are expected to engage in (Casanave, 2002; Lea & Street, 1999; Mitchell & Andrews, 2000). One Canadian and two American universities were the sites where the Iranian graduate students and their professors who participated in this study were recruited.

I had initially started the study with the following criteria in mind for the selection of the student participants: (a) they would be Iranian ESL graduate students enrolled at a Canadian university, and (b) at the time of their participation, they would be engaged in writing disciplinary texts that fit the definition of argumentative writing. Through the selection of Iranian participants, I had no intentions of making any generalizations about their first language. Rather, I intended to provide a rich description of the perceptions, experiences, and literacy practices of a number of international students with similar educational, linguistic, and social-cultural backgrounds in the context of institutions of higher education where English was the language of instruction.

After obtaining the relevant ethics approval from the University of Ottawa, I started the process of participant recruitment during the winter 2005 academic session. When I first embarked on the recruiting process, I was concerned that I might not be able to find enough Iranian graduate students willing to participate in the study within the local contexts that I had access to, which consisted of two Canadian universities with graduate programs in Social Sciences and Humanities. I posted invitation letters to participate in the study (*Appendix B*) on message boards in the hallways of some of the

graduate programs in both universities. I also sent out the letter electronically via the mailing list of Iranian Students' Association, and left copies of the invitation letters in the mailboxes of some fellow graduate students. In my initial attempt during the 2005 winter session, I only managed to find two graduate students meeting the criteria who were interested in participating in the study. One alternative would have been opening up the research question to include ESL international students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, but that would have eliminated the intercultural rhetoric dimension of the study and my unique position as an insider to the participants' first language and literacy experiences. However, relocating to the U.S. during the data collection phase of the study changed the picture and facilitated my access to Persian speaking graduate students. I got a teaching position as a lecturer at a university in the East Coast during 2006-2007 academic year. As a major academic institution in a region that is home to the second largest community of Iranians in diaspora, this university hosted a sizable number of Iranian graduate students. While most of the Iranian international graduate students that I knew or had access to back in Canada were studying at Science and Engineering departments, here I had the opportunity to tap into a diverse group of students from Social Sciences and Humanities backgrounds, who frequently visited the university's Persian language and literature department for different reasons, or happened to be working there as graduate assistants. The institutional review board of ethics at this university as well as another state university were one of the participants was enrolled both approved of the original ethics approval I had obtained from the University of Ottawa. I finally recruited six Iranian graduate students, one of whom dropped out of the study to return to Iran due to unexpected family problems. The remaining five students

were the primary research participants. In addition, three disciplinary area professors with whom these students were taking courses agreed to participate in the study.

Student participants. Five international graduate students from Iran, one male and four females between the ages of 25 and 33 were the primary participants of this study. Except for one participant who had just arrived in the U.S. to start her graduate studies, all had lived in North America for a period of twelve to eighteen months at the time of their recruitment for this study. One of the participants had completed her Master's degree in the U.K. prior to coming to the United States for her doctoral program. The other four students, however, had no overseas experience before coming to North America as international graduate students. All of the participants had met the minimum language proficiency requirement of their academic institutions. The participant who had a Master's degree from the U.K. had been exempted from taking a proficiency test. None of the participants had attended, or had been advised to attend, a general academic writing course in their host institution. Table 1 provides a summary description of the student participants. Students' proficiency scores on the paper-based (PBT) and computer-based (CBT) TOEFL tests are included as reported by the students themselves, as a measures of their English proficiency level. All the names are pseudonyms selected by the participants themselves.

Table 1. *Student participants*

Name	Gender	Program	Discipline	Term of Study	TOFEL Score (PBT/677 CBT/300)
Amir	M	M.Ed.	Teaching, Learning and Evaluation	4 th	586(PBT)
Nina	F	M.Ed.	Second Language Education	4 th	540 (PBT)
Marian	F	M.A.	Second Language Acquisition	1 st	240 (CBT)
Ava	F	Ph.D.	Comparative Literature	2 nd	Exempt
Sepideh	F	Ph.D.	English & Language Arts	3 rd	600 (PBT)

More detailed descriptions of the participants are presented below. As mentioned earlier, these descriptions are included in this chapter, as the research questions and the findings of the study are primarily concerned with the texts and writing practices of the participants rather than the individuals themselves.

AMIR

Amir was a 29-year old male student completing an M.Ed. program in Teaching, Learning and Evaluation at a Canadian university. Amir had applied to this particular university for his graduate studies because his sister lived in town. He was staying with his sister's family and had a long commute to school everyday, which he complained made it difficult to interact and mingle with his peers as often as he wanted to. He had been in the program for eighteen months at the time of the interview, and was just about

to submit a final paper that was the last requirement of his degree program. Originally from Tehran, Amir, who was from a religious minority subject to persecution in Iran, had completed his major in Language Studies and Linguistics at a private Institute of Higher Education in his hometown. Like many other young members of his religion in Iran who risk going public with their faith, he had been disqualified to take the national admission examination to state universities. I had never heard of the institute where he had completed his studies, but Amir stated that their religious community had established its own university since 1987: “I can say it’s a fully-fledged university; it’s independent and private. Many people outside our community don’t even know about it.” (Amir’s interview, May 2005)

Amir had come to Canada to do his Master’s degree with a scholarship from the same institute. “In return,” he explained, “we are expected to go back and work at the institute for at least one year. We’re supposed to help the community, just as others helped us.” (Amir’s interview, May 2005). According to Amir, the instructors at the institute are mostly lawyers, doctors, dentist, engineers, and even some university professors from the community who work there voluntarily and without any financial compensation. Hoping he could return to North America in the future, Amir was determined to go back to Iran right after completing his degree program to do his one-year service commitment.

Describing his undergraduate program of studies Amir said that it comprised a number of courses offered in the three languages of English, Persian and Arabic (plus a few elementary level courses in French) with a focus on three components of literature, linguistics, and translation in all the languages. He explained that the bulk of the courses

were offered in English, and 70 out of the required 140 credits for completing the major were in the English concentration. Compared to similar undergraduate programs in other Iranian state or private universities, this seems to be a rather general program with a broad spectrum. Most of the students who complete their undergraduate work in Iran in foreign languages would be majoring in one of the fields of Translation, Language and Literature, or Foreign Language Teaching and Learning in one of the available language programs including English, French, German, Spanish, and a few other languages. Amir believed that completing his undergraduate studies in this particular institute had made his educational experience somewhat different from that of other Iranian international students enrolled in language education programs in regular state or private universities.

NINA

Nina was a 26-year old female student originally from a small town in Northern Iran. Similar to Amir, she had come to Canada through a fellowship program sponsored by the same institute in the fall of 2003 with a cohort of graduate students. At the beginning of our first interview session, she introduced herself as an international student from Iran and a true believer in her faith. I later noticed that she had started one of the papers that she shared with me with a similar introduction. This, along with articulating her religious values on many occasions in our conversations, and the occasional religious references and quotes in her papers were all unmistakable indications of her strong religious identity.

Nina was a very determined individual and extremely clear about what she wanted to do in the future. She had worked with young children both as an EFL tutor and

a music instructor in Iran for three years. She said she was very interested in incorporating music and literature into teaching EFL to children. She was hoping she would be able to apply what she learned in graduate school here in Canada to her practice back at home in creative ways. She was enrolled in an M.Ed. program in Second Language Education. In the final paper that she was required to submit at the end of her program of studies, she had reflected on the importance of the graduate school experience for her as follows:

Being accepted in the field of Education in [this University] to do my Masters degree, I was like a thirsty traveler in a desert, reaching to the water of knowledge. I really liked to learn something from every course offered in the faculty! My main purpose of studying education was knowing about new theories of teaching and learning (especially teaching second language to children), new methods of evaluation and assessment and how they are practiced in Canadian schools. Gaining this knowledge, I want to transfer it to my colleagues in Iran, and collaborate with them to make a better educational environment in my workplace. (Nina's paper for her final course)

Nina described herself as “a bad writer, even in Persian; actually *especially* in Persian!” In our conversations, she made it very clear that she did not enjoy writing, and that writing at school had been an unpleasant experience for her. She explained that she had received many awards and certificates for her success in different subject areas at school, but essay writing was never one of them. She felt that she had generally handled the writing requirements of her graduate program better than she had initially expected. “I got a lot of B's and C's on my papers, but at least I never failed a course because of my

writing.” I got to know Nina during the first semester of her residence at the Faculty of Education. I would often see her at the graduate students’ lounge, busy reading or working on her projects. She came to me a few times with questions about courses she wanted to take, whether I knew the professor teaching the courses, and similar topics on which graduate students usually consult their senior peers. She sometimes asked me to eyeball her short written assignments for grammar or vocabulary problems. She expressed interest in my research topic during our conversations, and readily offered to be a research participant in the study. By the time I obtained the ethics approval and started recruiting participants for my research project, Nina was working towards the completion of the last requirement of her degree program, which was a synthesis paper. She enthusiastically accepted to participate and shared with me several drafts of the papers she had written for her previous courses, which she had meticulously filed. Upon graduating from her MEd program, Nina headed back to Iran in the summer of 2005, with a teaching position awaiting her at the institute which had sponsored her studies in Canada.

MARJAN

I first met Marjan in the winter of 2006, when I started my new position as a Persian language lecturer at an East Coast university. We were both new to the United States and to the campus. She had just arrived from Iran with an admission scholarship from the University for completing a Ph.D. program in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and working part-time as a teaching assistant at the newly launched Persian Language Teaching Program. She was 31 years old at the time, and had recently received her Master’s degree in Teaching Persian to Speakers of Other Languages from an Iranian

university. As colleagues we worked closely and we soon became friends. One thing that I kept hearing from Marjan was that she had never been able to “connect” to the English language. She had taken English language courses in high school language, completed her undergraduate studies in translation, and been through a Master’s program with faculty members from Applied Linguistics departments who would assign English language textbooks and articles for course readings, and would require students to write their papers in English. All this, however, had apparently done little to change her mind. “Instead,” she recalled, “I’ve always, always liked Persian literature. I have a passion for Persian language and literature.” Despite her true interest, due to a fiercely competitive National Admission Exam for colleges and universities, she had ended up in a field that she was not particularly interested in. Consequently, SLA did not seem to be her first choice for a doctoral program either. Yet again, the priority for her at this point in her life had been leaving Iran and getting a North American education while working here. She had found a scholarship from an American university to be too unique an opportunity to miss.

Marjan was clearly much more passionate about her work at the Persian department than her own highly cognitively oriented doctoral program. In our staff meetings, she colorfully described the details of her previous tutoring experiences in Iran, where she used to teach Persian to small groups of researchers or graduate students from Japan, U.S. , and Germany visiting her home university. She was a creative and dedicated instructor who took her responsibilities seriously and impressed her colleagues. Her Ph.D. studies, however, did not seem to go very well. I heard her several times expressing concern over the load of her readings, the theoretical nature of the program, and the fact

that it took many research skills for granted. Towards the end of the first semester, she was obviously struggling with many of the course requirements such as oral presentations and critical analyses of research reports, and most importantly with writing her term papers. After going through a very challenging academic year, Marjan decided to switch to a Master's program. Upon getting the approval of her supervisor to enroll in the M.A. program in SLA, she started a less stressful second year. She seemed to have more time to get to know her new environment, make new friends, and actively participate in conferences and events organized by graduate student associations. She even found time to produce and host programs for a local Persian podcast radio along with a group of fellow Iranian students. Towards the end of her program of studies in the summer of 2008, she found a full time job as a Persian language lecturer at another American university which offers a Ph.D. program in Persian Studies. Marjan is now hoping to follow her long time dream of specializing in Persian language and literature in North America through applying to that doctoral program after one or two years at her new job.

AVA

Ava was a 28-year old doctoral student of Comparative Literature at the department of English at the university where I worked. She had done her undergraduate studies back in Iran in the field of Translation. Prior to moving to the U.S., she had completed a Master's degree in Victorian Literature in England, as an international student. She had then started a doctoral program in English Literature there. After meeting with an Iranian professor of Literature from an American university at a conference, Ava had considered the possibility of pursuing her doctoral studies in the States. Upon securing admission and a doctoral scholarship for Fall 2007, she had moved

to the U.S. during the summer of the same year. Because she had earned a graduate degree from the U.K., Ava was exempted from presenting a TOEFL score for admission. She was so fluent in English that she was sometimes mistaken by her American peers as someone raised in the U.K. Ava had started learning English at the age of fifteen at a private language institute back in her hometown of Shiraz, Iran. She had a passion for art history and literature, and was very interested in the translation of children's literature. She told me that in her spare time, she worked on translating a collection of fairy tales from English to Persian.

I met with Ava shortly after her arrival in the U.S., when she started working at my department as a graduate research assistant. Her past experience at an English academic institution seemed to have made the transition relatively easy for her. She agreed to participate in the study, and put me in touch with one of the two disciplinary professors with whom she was taking a course during that academic session. Like the other participants, Ava expressed a great deal of interest in the project, pointing out that writing at graduate school was one of the things she had struggled with during her studies in the U.K. She further added that she was even more concerned about academic writing now that she had started a doctoral program, despite her excellent command of English. Ava was determined to pursue an academic career. She said that even during her undergraduate years in Iran, the only career path that she envisioned for herself was becoming a university professor. Ava was well aware of the importance of a strong publication record in finding an academic position, and perhaps for this reason, she described writing papers as "the single most important part of doctoral studies".

SEPIDEH

Sepideh was a 29-year old female student, who had moved to the U.S. from Iran in 2003 with her husband and their two-year old son. About a year and a half later, she had started a doctoral program in English and Language Arts at a university where her husband was working as a faculty member at another department. Sepideh had a Master's degree in English Language and Literature from an Iranian university. Her first language was Kurdish, and she was born and raised in Kurdistan province in North-western Iran. She recalled that as early as the age of five when she had started pre-K, she had experienced the stress and anxiety around schooling in a language other than her mother tongue. Although Persian is the official language of Iran, it is not unusual for kids with home languages such as Kurdish, Turkish (Azeri), and a few others to go to school without much familiarity with the Persian language. Reflecting on her literacy experience back in Iran, Sepideh expressed her love for her literature courses, poetry and creative writing. She said that she had started experimenting with creative writing and short stories at the age of eighteen, under the supervision of a friend who was a professional writer. For the completion of her Master's program in English literature back in Iran, Sepideh was required to write her thesis in English, which in her words was a daunting task for her given her limited English language proficiency and her little experience with academic writing at the time. She felt she had been very lucky to have the support of a very sympathetic committee member who had patiently walked her through all the stages of writing up her thesis. Although Sepideh believed she had learned tremendously from working closely with this professor, she related that her North American graduate school experience, particularly her experience with academic writing, was by far more difficult

and more stressful than what she had anticipated. Sepideh came across as a highly motivated and very dedicated individual who was doing her best to make the most of her higher education experience in the face of many challenges. “Sometimes it is too stressful, but I do not give up!” she once remarked. Throughout this research project, Sepideh and I had numerous email exchanges and phone conversations as she seemed to be truly engaged with the topic and the direction this inquiry was taking. She closely followed up on the development of the project and I did my best to keep her informed of the results and interpretations as I went along, and asked for her reflections.

When I first met Sepideh and recruited her for my research project in the spring of 2007, she had just finished her doctoral course work and was about to start her comprehensive exams. Sepideh provided me with the contact information of two of her professors whose courses she had just completed during that semester. One of the professors accepted to participate in an interview session. The professor also consented to my observation of one of their one-on-one conferences, where she and Sepideh would be discussing a paper from last term that the professor had not returned yet. Unfortunately that session never materialized due to a minor surgery the professor had to go through at the time. Instead, she kindly invited both me and Sepideh over to her place for a conversation session around the subject later during the summer. Although slightly different from what I had initially envisioned, the session turned out to be a very interesting conversation around writing between a professor and a graduate student, and a very rich data source.

Faculty participants. In addition to the five primary student participants introduced above, three faculty members, one from each university agreed to participate

in the study. In consultation with each student and with their informed consent, I approached one of their disciplinary professors for whose course they were supposed to submit at least one term paper while they were participating in the study. The two students from the Canadian university were both taking their final course (the last requirement of their degree program) with the same professor at the time, who agreed to participate in the study. I also recruited one professor from one of the universities in the U.S., with whom two of the doctoral student participants were both taking a course. Finally, the doctoral student from the other university in the U.S. put me in touch with two of her professors, one of whom accepted to participate in the study. The professors will also be referred to by their pseudonyms throughout this research report.

Both Amir and Nina were taking the last course of their M.Ed. program with Professor Watson when they participated in this study. Dr. Watson was a seasoned Anglophone professor with years of experience as both an educator and an educational consultant. In her previous position at a Canadian college of teacher education she had designed and taught various professional development courses, primarily focused on the role of research in teacher education. She had extensively published and presented on the topic of reflective inquiry, and in her own words, made sure that she provided her graduate students with opportunities to reflect on their past experiences in her courses. Dr. Watson was a visiting professor at the university where this study was conducted, and she was on the verge of retirement at the time. She agreed to participate in the study only if she did not have to comment the papers of her individual students, but rather discuss the disciplinary writing of her ESL students in a more general sense.

The second professor whom I interviewed was an Iranian-American professor who taught Persian literature at the college of Arts and Humanities in one of the two American research sites. Dr. Kaviani was an internationally recognized scholar of Persian language and literature, and of Iranian culture and civilization. He had taught at graduate schools for several years both in Iran and the U.S. He agreed to participate in this study as both an expert on Persian rhetoric and composition, and a faculty member who has worked closely with many international graduate students from Iran over years. Both Marjan and Ava were taking courses with him at the time of their participation in this study.

Finally, Dr. Shay was a professor of literature at the Department of English and Language Arts at the university where Sepideh was completing a Ph.D. program. When I first interviewed Sepideh, she had just completed a course on the American Novel with Professor Shay, in addition to a few other courses she had previously taken with her. Professor Shay was originally from India, and had taught at various universities in South Africa, India, Canada, and the United States over the years. She was the editor of a journal on African children and young adults' literature. Professor Shay had extensive experience of working with ESL students, but, as she put it, ever since she had started working at this particular department, she had seen only a handful of ESL international students from non-English speaking backgrounds. This, she explained, was due to the particular demographics and areas of expertise offered at her academic institution, which mainly attracts African Americans and students from the post-colonial or Caribbean countries where English is one of the official languages in most cases.

Data Sources

Data sources included semi-structured interviews, text-based interviews, observation notes of two talk-around-the text sessions, multiple drafts of student papers and faculty's written feedback on them, collected documents such as course outlines, assessment grids, email exchanges with participants, as well as research diary notes.

Interviews. Interviews were the most important source of data in this inquiry. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the five student participants as well as the three faculty members. I had prepared one set of open-ended questions (see Appendices F & G) for each of the two groups of participants, but I always allowed for digressions, followed up on unanticipated topics, and encouraged the participants to bring up any issues they themselves felt an urge to discuss. The purpose of these interviews was mainly to get to know the participants more closely, obtain information about their life histories and educational backgrounds, and elicit their attitudes toward and perceptions of academic literacy practices both in their home country and in the North American context. These initial interviews also set the stage for the upcoming collaboration in the form of sharing papers, participating in text-based interviews and communicating with their course professors.

All the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The students had a choice as to whether to conduct the interviews in Persian or English. Three of them decided to do their interviews in Persian, while two preferred to be interviewed in English. These interviews on average lasted from sixty to ninety minutes. I have included my personal reflections on the experience of interviewing second language speakers in their first language in the next chapter.

The faculty interviews typically lasted longer, between ninety minutes to two hours. The goal of these interviews was primarily to understand the professor's expectations with regards to disciplinary writing, their criteria as to what constitutes a good argumentative text, and their evaluation of the papers that the participating students produced for their courses. Only one professor agreed to comment on the specific case of a student participant. The other two professors, while very cooperative and extremely elaborate in sharing their views, preferred to talk about their experience with ESL or Iranian ESL students in a more general sense, without commenting on the papers of a particular student.

Text-based interviews. Text-based interviews (Prior, 2004), alternatively referred to as discourse-based interviews (Odell, Goswami, & Herrington, 1983), were conducted with the purpose of eliciting each student participant's tacit knowledge of the rhetorical aspect of certain texts as well as understanding the meaning of the particular choices they had made in those texts from their own perspective. The interviews were based on multiple drafts of the papers that the participants had decided to share with me, and in some cases the final drafts returned by their professors that included written feedback.

Observation of talk-around-the text sessions. One further source of data in this research study was the observation of writer-reader "talk around the text" conferences (Belcher, 1994; Ivanič, 1998; Leander & Prior, 2004), where the reader/evaluator gave oral responses to the written draft of papers and recommended revisions. The goal was to understand how the interaction of talk and text in a situated practice might influence the rhetorical structure of a written text. Although it is virtually impossible to capture all the oral interactions that can potentially influence the shape that a text takes, exploring the

conversations around texts and mapping out some of the ways such conversations are taken up and incorporated into subsequent drafts can contribute to the growing recognition that there is an interaction between talk and text (Casanave, 2002; Prior, 2004). Analyzing written texts without acknowledging such interactions - if and when they take place- would miss an invaluable source of information. Unfortunately, pragmatic concerns such as time constraints due to administrative responsibilities or teaching several courses with large numbers of students made such sessions less than a common practice among the professors participating in this study. In fact, talk around the text sessions were more common in the case of participants seeking assistance with their writing assignments from Academic Writing Center tutors or their fellow graduate students. I observed one such session between Marjan and her peer tutor when they closely collaborated on revising a draft of a conference presentation. I also had the consent of Sepideh and her professor to observe their scheduled meeting around the first draft of a term paper. As explained previously, the original meeting was cancelled and later took a slightly different form, where the three of us sat down for a one hour conversation around the texts that Sepideh had written for Professor Shay's courses.

Artifacts. Yet another source of data comprised of artifacts such as students' texts, course outlines, assessment grids, notes on the writing process by the students, and emails I received from the participants throughout the inquiry. Throughout the research process, I also kept a diary where I chronicled the day-to-day progress of the project, my own reflections on, or attitudes toward, common experiences that the participants recounted for me, my responses to unexpected events or situations, and the challenges I encountered throughout the process. Researchers' diaries are believed to add a new dimension to

research reports as they contribute to multivocality of the text (de Certeau, 1986) which in turn can further enrich and make the text accessible to readers who are trying to make sense of it. I considered keeping the diary as an integral part of the analytical process as I was collecting data.

Data Analysis

The multiple case studies research design (Merriam, 2001; Shekedi, 2005; Stake, 2000) that I adopted consisted primarily of in-depth interviews with the second language writers along with a close reading of their texts as well as the responses those texts elicited from their readers within the context of disciplinary writing in higher education. Because the method of inquiry and the paradigm within which I had framed the research questions assumed that individuals constantly construct the realities they experience, I attempted to record the student writers' first and second language literacy experiences from their own points of view, as they naturally engaged in acts of writing. Identification of the salient themes and discernable patterns of literacy practices began during the transcription of the interviews. I read through the transcript and listened to the interviews several times, to get immersed in the data to the point of easily remembering key points and relevant statements across cases as I examined the connections among the different experiences described within each case. I allowed the text to 'unfold' itself (Denzin, 1997) paying close attention to the participants' attitudes and perceptions and the realizations of these subjectivities in their understanding of writing in higher education. I coded the various observations under different themes and compared the themes across different interviews, looking for both commonalities and idiosyncrasies. Open coding began by stating a priori categories such as previous experiences, attitudes toward writing

in L1 and L2, understandings of academic writing, argument, and authorship. My personal experiences as an English L2 writer, Persian L1 speaker, and writing instructor, as well as how frequently the participants referred to certain ideas, all played a part in my judgments and decisions in this process. This aspect of the analysis of the interviews followed what Bruner (1985) refers to as a paradigmatic approach, where “a logical mode of knowing” is engaged to make sense of human actions and generate themes. The results are presented as various textual practices in Chapter Five.

There was yet another dimension to the experiences of the participants that either they shared with me during the interviews, or I personally witnessed during the course of their participation in this project. This mainly had to do with the stories of the encounter experiences for these second language writers particularly in the early stages of their socialization into their newly adopted disciplinary communities. At issue was the way the existing literacy practices of these student writers were received and evaluated at a time when they basically had not adopted the acceptable institutional practices yet. These were the narratives of stressful and emotional experiences that called for an approach other than an a priori paradigmatic one. In order to account for the meanings of these stories for the participant I adopted a narrative approach, which involves synthesizing anecdotal experiences into a coherent whole. The results will be presented in Chapter Six, where a critical academic literacy lens is adopted for the discussion.

As indicated previously, three of the participants chose to conduct their interviews in Persian, while the English interviews were also characterized by occasional code switching. The representation of the participants’ voices and the authenticity of their experiences is at the heart of this interpretive inquiry. For this reason, I have decided to

include the Persian interview excerpts alongside the English translations throughout the following chapters.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cultures of Writing and Textual Practices of Iranian L2 Writers

This chapter provides a report and discussion of the research findings in response to the questions concerned with the attitudes, perception, and practices of the participating L2 student writers in their disciplinary writing activities. Two of the research questions guiding this study were intended to explore 1) the way Iranian ESL graduate students perceive and understand writing in North American graduate school, and 2) the way their understandings are realized in their texts, textual practices, and interactions with their audience within the context of writing. Investigating these questions called for focusing on what the students had to say about their past and present writing experiences, both in general and in reference to the particular choices they made in their graduate papers. Equally important were the expectations of the audience, in this case the course professors who assigned, read and evaluated student papers within the context of disciplinary areas and academic institutions. This required a close focus on the student interviews as well as their written papers in order to understand textual decisions in light of what the writers had to say about them. At the same time, professor interviews provided insight into the expectations and the commonalities and divergences between acceptable practices and those that student brought into acts of writing. Some explanatory notes are provided below, to put the findings that will be presented next in perspective.

I had initially proposed to conduct three interviews with each student participant in this research study: one at the beginning of the semester when they were assigned to write the paper, one during the process of writing up the paper, and one after the student

would receive the professors' comments on the paper submitted. However, as I gained access and began data collection, I soon realized that in most cases this was not possible as the process of writing was much more messy and unstructured than I had anticipated: I heard from the students several times during the initial semi-structured interviews that they did not really plan their writing activities ahead. In fact, most of the students hinted that they even did not start writing their papers with an outline. As a case in point, having explained to one of the participants my plan for having three interviews and explaining what each interview was supposed to be about, he responded:

I don't think that's what I do when I write. I just read and put whatever comes to my mind on the paper and then I see what I can do with it. I can't write an outline first or plan it first. It's only after the whole thing is complete that I can look back and create an outline of what I have written.

(Amir's interview, May 2005)

Neither did the participants start working on their papers early on during the term as I had envisioned. In some cases, once they got their course outlines and realized what the writing requirements were, they informed me that they were going to start working on the paper soon, but whenever I checked back with them, even halfway through the semester, they would say they had not started working on the paper yet. With the study being naturalistic, I did not want to interfere with the process or try to change the normal course of the students' actions. I just kept following up with the students and recording their responses in my research diary. Then when the final weeks and the deadlines for submitting the papers were approaching, the students would rush into writing up their soon-due writing assignments. With all the stress and time constraints that they were experiencing, scheduling interviews or reflective conversations about the writing process

was indeed difficult. I received several emails from different participants apologizing for not having time to take reflective notes or meet up during the writing process as they had initially agreed to do. The following is a case in point:

Table 2. *An email from a student participant*

Date: Thu 21 Dec 13:28:01 EST 2006
From: [REDACTED] [Add To Address Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)
Subject: Re: Tue Dec 19th
To: [nahal akbari](#) <nakbaris@umd.edu>

Nahal jan,

I just called your number and as it turned out I had dialed a wrong number. I know I had promised to keep notes of my writing plan and other relevant stuff but as you know I just started working on the paper over the weekend. I stayed up the whole night last night to finish it but it's not done yet. I've sent an email to the prof to ask for an extension. I'm not sure if he agrees to that but I've been swamped with projects and papers--there's simply no way I can meet the deadline. Anyway, unfortunately I haven't done what I promised, but maybe we can talk about it later if that helps.

I just wanted suggest that since the school is closed for the holidays if you need to work on your project you are more than welcome to come to my place sometime next week and we can discuss it. I will hopefully be done with everything by then. Or we can meet up in [REDACTED]. I am sorry that I cannot offer a more convenient place, but I thought since we are practically neighbours it would be easier for us to meet somewhere here. Let me know what you think.

Ghorbanat,
 [REDACTED]

I would also like to mention that the term “difficulty” is a key word in the discussion offered in this chapter. Even though I made a deliberate attempt to avoid terminology that would pre-judge the writings of students or frame them in terms of absence of knowledge, deficiency, or deviation from acceptable rules (Pardoe, 2000; Zamel, 1997), professors and students interviewed in this study frequently used such

terms as difficulties, problems, and (un)successful writing as they reflected on second language writing and written texts. One of the early assumptions of contrastive analyses of languages conducted within the framework of contrastive rhetoric currently being criticized has been the assumption of “difference equals difficulty” (Connor, Nagelhout, & Rozycki, 2008). An issue that emerged throughout my conversations with the research participants was that the perception of potential learning problems whenever there is a difference is very common among most of the students and faculty members.

Another note of clarification is with regards to the illustrative samples of texts presented here. During the interviews, participants referred to certain rhetorical features or textual attributes that they believed were unique to the Persian language and, in their opinion, made writing in Persian and English two qualitatively different experiences for them. Being a speaker of Persian, in most cases I could easily identify the specific characteristics they were referring to, or speculate what the source of their perceptions and understandings might have been. To make the text more accessible for my English readers not familiar with the Persian language, I have decided to incorporate actual samples of student writings that can represent the features in question. However, since this study is a naturalistic inquiry, it has not always been possible to find corresponding samples of those particular rhetorical features or textual attributes in the writings of the participants. As elaborated in the methodology chapter, in some cases I have selected short samples from the abstracts of theses written in Persian, as well as excerpts from Persian newspaper editorials or academic journal articles, along with their English translations, to provide the reader with a more tangible experience of the rhetorical features the participants are referring to. While these texts represent different genres of

writing that may not be comparable, it is important to note that the intent here is not to make any generalizations about the Persian language based on these textual samples. In addition, I will be offering literal translations of the Persian texts in order to preserve the particularities of the original texts. For this reason, the English versions may occasionally sound awkward or clumsy.

The findings presented in this chapter point to a significant distance between the students' attitudes and perceptions of writing in graduate school on one hand, and their professors' expectations and understandings on the other. Some areas of divergence that will be highlighted are the general conception of academic writing and its goals, an awareness of the rhetorical context of writing, the nature of argumentation and its components, and the epistemological stance toward other scholarly works. Analysis and discussion is integrated with the findings presented. The differences between the students' understandings of each of the above concepts and the acceptability criteria in the context of writing will be interpreted in light of a dynamic understanding of writing cultures. That is, while avoiding static binaries (Atkinson 2004; Connor, 2004; Holliday, 1999; Kubota & Lehner, 2006), the existence of common threads and centripetal forces (Bakhtin, 1986) which create coherence and commonality in the experiences of students from similar social, educational and linguistic backgrounds will be highlighted.

Students' Accounts of L1 School Literacy versus the Dominant Practices in L2 Contexts

One of the first questions that I asked all student writers in the study concerned their experiences with academic writing in their first language and in the Iranian educational system. This is how Amir, a 29-year old male participant and a Master's

student of Organizational Studies in Education, remembered his experience with writing at school in Iran:

بیشتر که تو مدرسه آکادمیک نیست دیگه یعنی بیشتر همون اسی ... نه، اسی که نه . . . کامپوزیشن و انشاست چیزی که خودمون می‌گیم؛ توی کلاسایی که بهش می‌گفتن انشای فارسی. اونم کلا سیستمش با این رایتینگ که ما تو بعدا توی انگلیسی یاد گرفتیم کاملاً حداقل برای من متفاوت بود . . . اینو من بعد از اینکه شروع کردم رایتینگ انگلیسی رو فهمیدم. یعنی - یه دفعه که با هم صحبت می‌کردیم گفتیم- مثلاً تو انگلیسی بهمون یاد دادن جمله ی اولمون مین استیتمنتون رو همون اول می‌اریم، توی اینتروداکشن می‌گیم ولی تو مدرسه، یعنی تو فارسی یادمه همیشه می‌بردیم آخرش می‌گفتیم "نتیجه می‌گیریم که. . ."، بعد اون جمله اصلی که می‌خواستیم در موردش صحبت کنیم رو می‌گفتیم . . . یه نکته این که این همه تاکید نمی‌شد سر حالا ساپورتینگ دیتیل، مثلاً بیان ساپورتت کنیم اون چیزی رو که می‌خوایم بگیم، مثال بیاریم، در واقع فقط نظر بود و به خاطر همین در واقع اسی رایتینگ نبود؛ آکادمیک رایتینگ نبود.

It's not really academic writing at school...it's mostly essay. . . . no, not essay, what we call composition, in courses actually called Persian composition. It was totally different, at least for me, from the English system . . . I realized this only after I started writing in English.... for example, in English a very important thing I learned was that you need your topic sentence or main idea at the beginning of your paper, in the introduction, you know. But I remember we didn't write like that at school, I mean in Persian. At the end of the text we would say "so we conclude that . . ." and then we would write the main idea.

One thing I'd like to say is [at school] they never emphasized things like supporting details, like, let's support the point we want to make, or give specific examples for it. [What we did] was just expressing an opinion and that's why I say it wasn't really essay writing or academic writing. (Amir's interview, May 2005, emphasis original)

Remembering my own K-12 and part of my tertiary schooling in Iran, I was not surprised to hear from Amir and the other participants that they had received little systematic writing instruction at elementary, middle or even high school. While each of us came from different parts of Iran, we all had very similar experiences at school as the Iranian educational planning is highly centralized. The Ministry of Education specifies a national curriculum for all public and private schools at all grade levels, publishes text books, finances education, and designs and administers a number of standardized tests at certain intervals. Education is, therefore, highly uniform throughout the country. A glance at the curriculum posted on the Ministry's website⁴ is very revealing with respect to the status of composition and rhetoric in the Iranian educational system. A course called composition is part of the elementary school curriculum in grades three to five for only 1 hour per week. It then disappears from the curriculum from grades six to nine with only some writing activity incorporated in Persian Literature course syllabi throughout these years. The composition course reappears in the high school curriculum from grade ten to twelve, but only in one of the four main tracks of high school education, which is the Literature and Culture track. Students in the other three tracks, including Mathematics and Physics, Experimental Sciences, and Social Science Studies do not have a

⁴ <http://www.medu.ir/> retrieved April 2006

composition course as part of their curriculum. In the Culture and Literature Track, an asterisk next to the composition course in the chart draws attention to a footnote in fine print that reads: “* taught along with the Persian Literature course”.

Marjan, the 31-year old Iranian student who was completing a Ph.D. in Second Language Acquisition when she was interviewed, recalled her school experience with writing as follows:

انشاء که همیشه به موضوعائی بود که تکراری بود. خیلی خلاقیت توش مطرح نبود. معلما اصلا معلوم نبود که از روی چی نمره می دن. فقط متنی که به نظرشون قشنگ بود خوب نوشته شده بود . . . همیشه میگفتن فلانی قشنگ مینویسه . . . ولی هیچ آموزشی نمی دیدی. هیچ وقت هیچ آموزشی ندیده بودیم فقط بهمون گفته بودن که . . . فقط بهمون گفته بودن با به مقدمه شروع کنید بعد در مورد موضوعتون صحبت کنید و بعد هم به پایان برسونین اون متنونو با به نتیجه . . . که البته مقدمه می تونست با نام خدا و به شعرو به چیزای این طوری شروع بشه که حالا انگار خیلی هم مهم نبود که ربطی به موضوع اصلی داشته باشه، یواش یواش وارد موضوع بشین. این تنها چیزی بود که یاد میدادن.

Composition topics were always the same, it wasn't really about creativity for the most part. And you never knew the teachers' criteria for marking. For them the only good writing was *beautiful* writing . . . they kept saying “so and so writes *beautifully*” but we never got any instruction, they just told us start with an introduction and then talk about your topic and finally wrap it up with a conclusion of some sort. Of course the introduction could be a religious

Cliché, like starting in the name of God, or a line of poetry for opening . . . it wasn't really important if it was relevant to the topic or not, just something to take it from there and gradually get into the topic. That's all they ever told you.

(Marjan's interview, May 2005)

For Nina, a Master's student of Second Language Education, attending these composition classes at school back home was not a very pleasant experience as she did not have a clear picture of the expectations. She described her experience in the composition class in following terms:

وای وحشتناک بود! نمیدونستیم چی میخوان ، چه جوری بنویسیم چون هیچ وقت واسمون قواعدهشو نمیگفتن. من انشام خیلی بد بود. نه کتابی، نه توضیحی، فقط بهت میگفتن برو سه چهار صفحه در مورد فلان موضوع بنویس. نمیدونم بعضیا چه جوری اینقدر خوب مینوشتن! . . . فکر کنم خیلی با استعداد بودن اونا! (میخندد)

Oh, it was horrible! You didn't know the rules, because nobody ever told you about the rules. I was terrible at composition. No textbook, no instruction, just telling you "OK, go ahead and write 3 or 4 pages on such and such topic", I don't know how some others did so well at it . . . I think they were really talented! (Nina's interview, May 2005)

In the absence of instructional materials and in the context of vaguely defined objectives and content for the course, how did the students figure out the expectations

and how did they actually engage in writing? Marjan recounted a textual practice that she had adopted to cope with this vagueness:

بعد دیگه توی دبیرستان من کاری که می کردم ، کلکی که می زدم در واقع برای امتحان انشام این بود که قبل از این که امتحان انشا داشتم می نشستم و یه کتاب می خوندم. هر کتابی . . . هر کتابی که نه؛ رمان نه مثلا. کتابایی که میدونستم موضوع عشون ممکنه به موضوع انشاهایی که بهمون میدادن نزدیک باشه. خوب تقریبا میشد حدس زد که چه موضوعائی ممکنه بدن تو شرایط سیاسی وایدنولوژیک اون موقع. مثلا . . . مثلا کتاب کویر دکتر علی شریعتی رو بر می داشتم، اینو می خوندم، خوب شعر هم حفظ بودم یه چند تائی از حافظ، مولوی، سعدی اینا رو حفظ بودم. بعد می رفتم سر جلسه موضوع انشائی که بهمون می دادن اون چیزائی که داشتم، اون کلمه هائی که توی ذهنم بودو راحت می تونستم پیاده شون کنم.

ن: از کتابائی که خونده بودی؟

آ: از کتابائی که خونده بودم. یعنی در واقع برای آماده شدن واسه نوشتن فقط کتاب می خوندم. چیزی نمی نوشتم یا تمرین کنم اینا . . . می خوندم و زیون اونو رو، کلمه های اونو رو میگرفتم و می رفتم سر جلسه و نمره های معمولاً خوبی هم می آوردم.

What I would do in high school was, actually the trick I pulled for the composition exam was that before the test I'd sit and read a book, not any book, the books I knew their topics would be close to the essay topics they would give us. It wasn't too hard to guess the topics in the political and ideological context of those days. Let's say I'd pick up

Shariati's *Kavir*⁵, and read it. And you know, I also knew some poetry by heart from Hafiz, Rumi, Sa'di and others. So I would go to the exam session and I would just bring the words I had in my mind on paper very easily.

N: Words from the books you had read?

A: From the books I had read. I mean for preparing to write I'd just read books. I didn't practice writing or anything. I just read books and picked up their language, their words, and then went to the exam session and usually got very good marks. (Marjan's interview, April 2006)

Marjan's strategy seems to have been effective in giving a quality to her writings that according to the participants in this study was encouraged at school. "Beautiful language" was an expression that came up numerous times in my conversations with the participants. In the experience of these students, effective use of metaphors, taking up a literary style, and reciting poetry and traditional or religious wisdom that would appeal to the emotions of the reader were some of the qualities that seemed to be highly valued in school writing. When I asked Amir, the Master's student in Education, if this is what was emphasized in his composition classes during his school year, he replied:

تاکید آنچنانی یا مثلاً درس دادنش که نبود، ولی معلوم بود دیگه چون هرچی
بیشتر ادبی مینوشتی، هرچی بیشتر شعر و آیه قرآن و سخن بزرگان و
اینجور چیزها استفاده میکردی خوب نمره بهتری میگرفتی معلماً بیشتر
خوششون می‌اومد.

⁵ A book by Ali Shariati (1933-1977). Shairati was an Iranian sociologist, famous for his work on the sociology of religion. He is known as one of the most influential Iranian social thinkers of the 20th century, and as the ideologue of the 1979 Iranian revolution.

There was no explicit emphasis or teaching of it, but you could easily tell because the more you had this literary quality in your writing, the more you used poetry or verses from Koran, the better grades you got and the more teachers liked your essays. (Amir's interview, May 2005)

Nina believed that having a literary quality was valued not only in school compositions, but also in all types of writing in Persian. She used a common metaphor of "قلم شیوا" which can be literally translated into "eloquent pen" [i.e., writing eloquently] to refer to what good writing in Persian is all about, and that it was what she believed was missing from her own writing:

کیفیت ادبی توی هر نوشته‌ای مهمه، نه فقط تو شعرو داستان و اینا. کلاً کار نویسندۀ ای رو خوب می بینم که هر چی منظورشه خیلی راحت، خیلی روون و زیبا بیان می کنه. این خیلی مهمه. مخصوصاً تو فارسی. این جا خیلی این طوری نیست به نظر من. نمی دونم حالا. شاید چون فارسی زیوم مادریمه... آره؛ زیبا نوشتن و روون نوشتن انگار خیلی مهم نیست و شاید من متوجه نشدم. ولی تو فارسی خیلی مهمه این مسئله. کسی که قلم شیوا داره کاملاً مشخصه. دقیقاً همون چیزی که من ندارم! (خنده)

Having a literary quality is important in all kinds of writing, not only in poetry or stories and things like that. To me a good writer is one who can express whatever he means in a very smooth, fluent and beautiful language. This is very important especially in Persian. It's really not like that here, I think. I don't know... maybe it's because Persian is my first language. Yeah... writing beautifully and fluently is not that important here I guess, or maybe it is and I haven't noticed. But in Persian it's *very* important. You can easily tell if someone has "an eloquent pen", and

that's exactly what I don't have! (laughs). (Nina's interview, May 2005)

In Nina's view this quality did not merely pertain to certain genres of writing such as literary essays, but was also dominant in other genres such as Persian academic writing.

Students' Textual Practices as Historical-cultural Constructs

Dr. Kaviani, the Iranian-American professor participating in this study has been teaching Comparative Literature in the United States for nearly thirty years, with an extensive publication record in both English and Persian languages. In his view, the rhetorical persuasion and appeal to emotion through the language of poetry rather than reasoning and argumentation have historically characterized the Persian language. He argues that there might be some explanations for the fairly dominant presence of literary language and poetic style in various spoken and written genres of Persian compared to other languages, particularly English. In our conversation, while emphasizing that these are his general impressions rather than hard facts about the characteristics of the Persian language, he explained:

It is my impression that . . . the English language has developed over the centuries in a much more *balanced* way, and by balanced I mean the various facets of the expression, the various fields and disciplines of inquiry in the language. Persian developed as a language to identify a people, and it came to identify those people through its literature. And so it is tremendously rich in the literary lexicon. The system of literary expression in Persian is very, very complicated, very sophisticated, but it also is an

alternative system to the system of the language itself. In English you don't have the system of expression of English poetry as being manifestly distinct or even at times at odds with the logic of the language. In Persian you do.

(Professor Kaviani's interview, June 2007)

Similar to Lotman (1990/ 2001) who postulates that texts and their structures are immersed in historical processes, this faculty member viewed the rhetorical features of the Persian language in light of historical events. After the Arab conquest of Persia in the 7th century AD, Arabic turned into the dominant language of official and intellectual circles in Iran for nearly two centuries (Keddie, 2006; Khanlari, 1995; Lewis, 2001). As a scholar of Persian language and culture, Dr. Kaviani attributed what he described as the "lagging behind" of language of logic and rationality in Persian compared to the language of literature on the historical dominance of the Arabic language in Iran for an extensive period of time. He argued:

Through the centuries, all the Persian writers and thinkers who were *not* poets for good reasons selected to write their scientific, philosophical or rational arguments not in Persian, but in Arabic, at the height of this culture's vitality and philosophical liveliness. As a result Persian has not developed as much in rational discourse . . . in tandem with the movements of Persian Poetry. Persian is weak in reasoning, in philosophical writing The language of politics, the language of philosophy, the language of rationality, the language of thought is still lagging behind in Persian.

He also suggested that there have been other forces at play that have generally given a poetic and persuasive quality to Persian writing:

There are of course other complicating factors as well Poetry has historically had license in this culture, and so it has not been- much as it may have been oppositional at times- opposing the two tiers of power; that is the political power structure and the religious power structure. It has still been given a license to express itself. [. . .] The outcome of all of this has been that when people write, they often times do not have a clearly demarcated idea of the spheres of discourse. Often times I read journalistic articles, let's say in the defense of Hejab or criticism of Hejab, but their appeal is basically rhetorical- that is to say poetic. They try to *persuade* you, not *reason with you*. (Emphasis original)

Marjan, who had completed a Masters degree in teaching Persian to speakers of other languages back in Iran, suggested in her interview that even the academic papers that she used to read in Persian in her field of study had “a literary spin” to them. She went on to say that, “You often couldn’t see a clear statement of the main point. Writers tried to advance their position by speaking passionately and emotionally about the subject”. On this basis, it appears that the tendency of Persian speakers and writers to judge literary style and figurative language as defining features of good writing has its roots in the particular historical development of the Persian language.

English Academic Writing as a Historical-cultural Construct

In what follows I will draw upon faculty responses to the interview questions and their comments on certain features in the students’ English writings to demonstrate that their expectations generally reflect the dominant literacy practice in North American academic institutions referred to as *essayist literacy*. This type of literacy is an orientation

toward reading and writing that has its roots in the empiricism in the seventeenth century (Farr, 1993; Lillis, 2001; Olson, 1977; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Trimbur, 1990).

According to Trimbur (1990), essayist literacy is associated with the production and use of texts that are “immediately readable, without the density, allusion, and ambiguity we associate with literary texts” (p. 73). In contrast to what the students and the Persian-speaking faculty member in this study describe as the presence, even the dominance of literature in various domains of Persian prose, Trimbur (1990) speaks of a clear demarcation between essayist prose and literary texts in the English language. He suggests that:

To find out what essayist prose means, all readers have to do is find out what it says. The meaning appears to be already present in the words on the page. In contrast, when prose thickens with figurative language, as readers we intuitively know we have left the realm of essayist literacy and entered that of literature where meanings are ‘hidden’ and we must employ strategies of interpretation to dig them out of the text - to close the gap between what the text says and what it means. (P. 73)

Trimbur (1990) goes on to argue that because of the dominance of essayist literacy in the Western school system, it has almost become second nature to people, so much so that the historicity of the essayist literacy and its cultural roots are too often overlooked. Along the same line, in his influential work on the transition from orality to literacy, Olson (1977) posits that the *Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge (the Royal Society)* in seventeen and eighteen century England was the culminating site for essayist literacy, when the written discourse of the middle class

characterized by minimum ambiguity, explicit internal transition between sentences, adhering to rules of logic, and locating meaning in the text, among other defining features rose to dominance.

Lillis (2001) finds the essayist literacy to be a very useful notion in talking about student writing in higher education, as it is one way of acknowledging that certain “ideologically inscribed” socio-historical practices regulate acceptable knowledge-making practices in English-speaking schools and academic setting. While these practices are clearly diverse in different social and disciplinary contexts, they tend to display such common features as being linear, explicit, coherent, focusing on a central theme, and making minimum assumptions about shared knowledge between readers and writers (Gee, 1996; Hinds, 1987).

Contrary to the experience of the student writers in this study, who have been steeped in the Iranian educational system, their peers in North American schools often get explicit instruction on these privileged literacy practices through years of formal schooling. As a case in point, the following excerpts are taken from the introductory pages of an agenda daily organizer provided to 9th and 10th graders at a high school in Ontario, Canada. I find it particularly interesting that a thirty-page *Guide to Student Report and Essay Writing* prepared by the school is included alongside key information on the general guidelines and school policies in a daily agenda book. It is important to note that the document lays out some of the hallmarks of essayist literacy discussed above appearing under *Tips for Ensuring your Writing is Acceptable* as follows:

1. Write clearly -- do not try to be stylish.
2. Stay on topic -- do not digress.

3. Don't overwrite. If a word, phrase, sentence, example, etc., is not necessary, edit it out.
4. Use fresh, precise diction. Consult a thesaurus.
5. From the onset, be aware of the purpose and intended audience for the assignment. Gear every sentence toward these.
6. Avoid either too informal (slang-ridden) or formal (pompous and stilted) a style of writing. [. . .]

(St. Pius X High School, 2004 Agenda, p. 13)

Table 3. Sample of a high school agenda book detailing writing guidelines.

Rough Copy: Do your rough copy on regular notebook paper. You must show signs of change and revision! A rough copy must be rough. Using the checklist provided below, proof read for the following:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| ___ focus | ___ spelling |
| ___ organization | ___ grammar |
| ___ style (variety of vocabulary) | ___ punctuation |
| ___ sentence structure | ___ proper format |

SENIOR FORMAT

THESIS = LIMITED TOPIC + CONTROLLING IDEA

A thesis is expressed in paragraph form.

Think of the thesis as having **three objectives**:

1. It states **what** the topic is.
2. It states **how** the topic will be developed.
3. It indicates **why** the topic is important.

OR

Think of the thesis as answering three questions:

1. **What** is my point?
2. **How** will I develop it?
3. **Why** is it important?

DEVELOPING A SPECIFIC THESIS : EXAMPLE

General or broad subject: *The elderly in society*

1. **WHAT:** *The elderly in society should be given a more active role.*
2. **HOW:** Developed by: **MAJOR IDEAS/SECTIONS**
 - a) Example - Looking at historical examples and detailed illustrations.
 - b) Comparison and Contrast - Comparing to other groups or societies.
 - c) Definition and Classification - Classifying the elderly into different age or financial groups

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- d) Methods of Ordering - 1. Chronological: the elderly through time.
2. Spatial 3. Inductive/Deductive

To complete this thesis, add

3. The **WHY:** The importance of your topic
...an understanding of their potential contributions would help overcome the growing indifference towards the aged in our society.

4. Therefore the thesis statement is comprised of numbers 1, 2 and 3:

The elderly in society should be given a more active role. Compared to the treatment of the Elderly in Eastern Europe and in comparison to the historical roles the elderly played in Aboriginal societies, numerous studies point to the active roles that the elderly have played in society. An understanding of their potential contributions would help overcome the growing indifference towards the aged in our society.

SAMPLE SENIOR ESSAY OUTLINE

I. THESIS PARAGRAPH:

What: _____

How: 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____

Why: _____

Complete Thesis Statement: _____

II. BODY PARAGRAPHS:

A. Major Idea/Section: _____

1. Supporting Paragraph: _____
2. Supporting Paragraph: _____

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Contrary to the relative familiarity of North American students with this genre of writing through their exposure to principles of essayist literacy, the Iranian student writers in this study came to learn about the five paragraph essay - a common requisite in writing assignments in North American middle schools and some elementary schools- when they majored in English, EFL teacher education, or Translation Studies during their undergraduate years. It is important to note that these are the only programs of study in the Iranian tertiary system with a considerable English language component. Students majoring in these fields therefore come to gain a rudimentary knowledge about what constitutes essayist literacy. For instance, Amir who used to be an English major, stated that this put him at an advantage compared to many of his fellow Iranian students who were completing their undergraduate degrees in other fields of study back home, and intended to enter graduate school in North America:

به من خیلی کمک کرد؛ خیلی کمک کرد؛ چون برای ورود به اینجا ما
مجبور بودیم به امتحان ورودی یا کی ال بدیم یا کن تست یا تافل حالا هر
چی . . . به خصوص این دو تا اولیا کی ال و کن تست سیستمشون طوریه
که به رایتینگ شما مجبوری بنویسی، بهت موضوع میدن و دقیقاً اساس این
آزمون نوشتن همون چیزائی بود که من خوند ه بودم به خاطر همین مثلاً
ماها که یک گراوندمون این بوده ، زبان دوم خوندیم ایران، تقریباً با اینا
مشکل نداشتیم همه ی بچه ها با یک بار امتحان دادن قبول می شدن، حالا
بچه هائی که مهندسی می خونن و یا فارماکولوژی یا ادبیات فارسی و تاریخ
یا هرچی؛ اینا اکثراً می افتادن حتی اگر زبانشون هم قوی بود چون تجربه
نوشتن توی این سیستمو نداشتن.

[My undergrad program] helped me a lot. It helped me a lot in getting admission here, because we had to take a language test for admission . . . either the CAEL or the CanTEST or, I don't know- say the TOEFL. These tests, especially the first two . . . their system is such that you have to write something . . . they gave you a topic and the type of writing they wanted was exactly based on what I had studied. So for those of us who had a background in second language, majored in second language in Iran, we almost had no problem with these tests. We all passed the first time. But those guys who were in engineering, or pharmacology or, or Persian literature, history, whatever, even if their English was much better than ours, they'd fail because they didn't have experience with this system of writing. (Amir's interview, May 2005)

Whether because of the historical dominance of the literary language in Persian, their relative unfamiliarity with the essayist literacy, or any other reason, the students in this study clearly valued figurative language and poetic style and believed it was an important characteristic of all writing in Persian. This had been part of their literate experience at school and in their everyday lives, and they did not necessarily think it had to be avoided in academic writing. Their professors, in contrast, did not welcome traces of this textual practice in the student papers in ways that they judged them to be inappropriate. One faculty member, for instance, reasoned that these features demonstrated "stylistic errors that [disturbed] the academic diction and the evenness of tone" (Professor Watson's Interview, June 2005, emphasis added). The example below indicates how this faculty member responded to a stylistic choice in a student's synthesis paper at the end of her M.Ed. program. In the first part of the writing task, students were

required to critically reflect on the programs of study they were about to graduate from.

The following excerpt is taken from Nina's paper:

Being accepted to do my Masters degree, like a thirsty traveler in a desert, reaching to the water of knowledge, I liked to learn something from every course offered. My main focus was on new theories of teaching and learning (especially teaching a second language to children), new methods of evaluation and assessment and how they are practiced in Canadian schools. (Nina's final paper, first draft)

The professor's marginal note next to this paragraph read: "Try to stick to plain academic style, just to be more consistent". The note clearly signaled that she preferred the student to do away with the metaphors in favor of "the apparent artlessness of the plain style" with which the essayist literacy is generally identified (Trimbur, 1990, p.81). Since the professors participating in this study had expressed concerns over commenting on specific student papers, it was not possible to query them about any particular paper or comment they had made on the papers. Nonetheless, some of their general comments clearly had bearing on certain features in student papers. For instance, elaborating what characteristics she liked to see in a student paper, the same professor mentioned that style was as important to an academic argument as the content. She added that, when reading student papers, she would look to see whether:

[A]n attempt has been made to use clear, straightforward language, or the language is just emotionally charged, something that I'd say I often see in the papers of some of my ESL students. I keep telling them that that they need to realize it's not enough for an argument to try to sway your

thoughts one way or another just through choice of words.

(Professor Watson's Interview, June 2005)

"Repetition Adds Richness to Writing": A Different Perception of Verbosity in Academic Writing

The student writers in this study had also noticed another difference between their own writing practices and what their professors expected to see in their academic papers. In some of our conversations the students stated that very often their writings were judged to be repetitive by faculty members and writing tutors. Indeed, a review of guides to academic writing available online, handouts of academic writing workshops and academic writing handbooks shows that students are constantly advised to avoid verbosity in their writings. Some aspects of verbosity that students are generally cautioned against include repetition, redundancy, circumlocution and using long modifiers (Bazerman, 1985; Swales & Feak, 2000).

Participants identified conciseness with words as one of the expectations of the professors that they first noticed when they started writing in North American graduate schools; an expectation that they did not quite feel comfortable with. Marjan, for instance, believed that:

[. . .] Repetition adds richness to writing. I think no two words exactly mean the same thing. Nadia [her peer tutor] tells me, for example . . . 'Don't say *full and complete*' but I think they *should* come together. They are really not the same. (Marjan's interview, emphasis original, April 2006)

Sepideh, another participant doing a Ph.D. program in English Literature, had a very similar idea with regards to expressing the same point in different words. In her

view it was “important to have the ability to repeat something in different ways to make it clear what you mean” (Sepideh’s interview, April 2006). These statements by the students prompted me to examine their papers in order to see there were examples of these features in evidence. The result revealed that these features were not only very dominant, but that they had elicited corrective feedback from their readers on several occasions.

An analysis of the feedback that Sepideh had received on one of her writing assignments indicated that the professor had used the terms “repetitive”, “redundant”, and “already mentioned” eight times in her marginal notes on a three-page paper. She had frequently crossed out words and phrases that were close in meaning. The following are some instances:

The most important projects of Fuller’s early career were translations such as [. . .] as well as an **unfinished** biography of Goethe. **She never completed her biography** of Goethe, but her critical essays are among the most thoughtful essays on him.

(Note on the margin: “repetitive”)

She was **one of the first** women in America to work as a salaried columnist for a newspaper and **she was a pioneer** in journalism.

(The last sentence crossed out. Note on the margin: “same idea”)

The girl is ‘a bit of a Jew and a bit of a German’ (p. 50), and the two strains of Jew and Nazi unite in the daughter.

(The second part crossed out. Note on the margin:
“repetitive”)

(Sepideh’s final draft of a writing assignment for a
Literature course)

The following note from my research diary bears on the issue of redundancy in writing, which I noticed after receiving an email from one of the participants.

Table 4. *A Sample note from the researcher's diary*

September 12, 2005

I received a short email from Amir saying he will be leaving for Iran soon. At the end of email, he says a friend who used to edit his papers has jokingly told him that he is happy to be getting rid of all of the ‘and’s’ he constantly had to take out from Amir’s papers!

After reading Amir’s email I went back to the first draft of one of the papers that he had shared with me earlier. I didn’t need to go too far along the paper to find out why his friend had said so. Here’s how the paper begins:

“One of the significant and fundamental stages in designing a language program is to find and identify the needs of learners. Based on the needs, the goals and objectives of the curriculum can be defined and specified.”

(Amir’s final paper for an Education course, first draft)

While talking about her early experiences with writing in English, Ava, another female participant doing her doctoral studies in Comparative Literature noted that a textual feature on which both her professors and peer tutors had occasionally provided corrective feedback was her use of lengthy sentences and complex structures. Reflecting

on the feedback, Ava attributed this feature of her English writing to the impact of her first language, where lengthy, coordinated sentences are believed to be common (Batani, 1995; Lazard, 1992). The following sentence taken from a Persian Master's thesis in the field of Early Childhood Education could be an instance of the textual feature that Ava was referring to. In this excerpt at least three complete sentences are combined into one through using the coordinate conjunction "and", which I have highlighted both in the Persian text and in its literal English translation.

روش‌های آموزش مهارت خواندن و نوشتن در ایران همانند دیگر کشورهای جهان مراحل مختلفی را طی نموده و هرچند روش فعلی آموزش در دبستان- های کشور حاصل تغییرات و اصلاحات در روش‌های گذشته است ، با این حال در برخی مدارس کشور از جمله دبستان‌های دوردست، آموزش مهارت خواندن و نوشتن بگونه‌ای مغایر با روش متداول صورت می‌گیرد که حاکی از بی‌اطلاعی یا حداقل عدم تمایل آموزگاران به استفاده از روش رایج در مراکز آموزشی است و علی‌رغم وجود ایرادهایی بر روش فعلی تدریس مهارت خواندن و نوشتن در مدارس، تا کنون اقدام موثری در رفع نقاط ضعف این روش به عمل نیامده و روشی که بتواند علاوه بر رفع نقاط ضعف متداول، با سن و روحیه کودکان سازگاری داشته باشد ارایه نگردیده است. (پایان‌نامه کارشناسی ارشد، رشته آموزش ابتدایی ، برگرفته از پایگاه اطلاعات و مدارک علمی ایران)⁶

Approaches to teaching reading and writing in Iran, like many other countries, have been through several transformations **and** although the dominant approach currently adopted in the country's elementary schools is in

⁶ <http://alpha-5.irandoc.ac.ir/scripts/wxis.exe?a=12:10:04>

place as a result of many modifications to earlier models, in some elementary schools in the rural areas, approaches to teaching reading and writing are drastically different [...] from the models currently followed in other educational centers and despite all the shortcomings in the approaches to teaching reading and writing in these schools, no effective measures have been taken to address this problem and no approaches have been proposed that can make up for the flaws while appropriate to school children's age and emotional needs. (Excerpt from the abstract of Master's thesis in Early Childhood Education)

"You're Going off on Tangents Again!": Text Development Practices

The issue of text development and organizational structure came up in response to an interview question concerning the student writers' definition of academic writing and the most important components of an academic paper in their opinion. Surprisingly, Nina and Amir, the two Master's students on the verge of graduation from their programs, could not go much beyond the five paragraph essay in their definition of academic writing and its components even though they had engaged in writing several papers for various courses in the nearly two years they had spent in graduate school in Canada.

When I asked Amir about his understanding of academic writing and how he would approach his writing assignments, he replied:

(کمی مکث). ام م م . . . خوب فرمتش که برای من مشخصه . . . یعنی وقتی میخوام پیپر مو دیولوپ کنم همیشه تو ذهنم اینه که اول اینتروداکشنم رو داشته باشم. اینتروداکشن در مورد چیزائی که قراره، می خوام چیزائی بگم خوب تو اینتروداکشنم می نویسم بعدم که بادی میام اون چیزائی که

قراره توضیح بدم، ساپورت کنم، . . . مین تیسس، ها؟ اونا رو می ارم و بعد کانکلوزن رو به طور خلاصه با یه زبون دیگه می آم می گم چیا رو من گفتم چی توی ذهن من هست.... بعد می مونه جمع آوری اطلاعاتم، که ببینم حالا می خوام در مورد چی صحبت کنم . . . حالا می رم، اگه به خصوص ریسرچ باشه می زم دنبال ریسرچ کتاب تو این زمینه پیدا می کنم و بعد ساپورت می کنم اونی، می بینم کمه، مثلا مثال اینجا نزدن چون همیشه من یکی از ضعفام این بوده که مثال کم می زنم، خیلی توضیح نمیدم، من شخصیتا یه آدم این جوریم که کم حرف می زنم (خنده) و مثلاً خیلی زیاد تمرین کردم که همیشه بگم: "فور اگزمل" و اینا . . . برای اینکه قضیه رو روشن کنم. همینای دیگه. . . اینا کارایه که انجام میدم معمولاً واسه پیپر نوشتن.

Umm, . . . well, the structure is quite clear to me. I mean, when I develop my text the first thing in my mind is to have an introduction. The introduction is about what I am going to say, then the next thing is the body . . . here I bring the things I'm supposed to explain, to support, . . . the main thesis, right? So I put those here and then in the conclusion I summarize or I say in other words the things that were in my mind. The next thing left is collecting data on what I am talking about...if it's a research project I go find books or articles on the topic to support my point. Sometimes I see there needs to be more in there, like 'I need to bring an example here'. . . . because one of my problems is that I don't use many examples or I don't explain as much as I should. It's a personality thing; I don't talk that much (laughs) and I've practiced a lot to make sure that I say 'for example' and things like that to make my point clear . . . I guess that's it; that's pretty much what I do when I write my papers. (Amir's interview, May 2005)

However, through the feedback they had received on several papers, both Nina and Amir had realized that organizing papers based on their knowledge of what had to go into the introduction, body, and conclusion of the essay, and of course “using source texts to support [their] ideas” (Nina’s interview, May 2005) was not enough to meet the expectations of their professors. As Nina put it:

I do all that and they still tell me my paper is not well-organized or the ideas are not developed. Sometimes there is a grid with different components, and my lowest mark on that is for the organization of my paper. (Nina’s interview, May 2005)

Ava, who had a strong command of English, raised an interesting point as she reflected on her experience with text development in the essays she used to write in Persian at school back home. She recalled that even the word “introduction” implied a different notion in her early school experience:

Introduction at first meant something *totally* different to me. I remember back at school most of the kids memorized a few lines as an introduction they could use for all their essays no matter what the topic was. I guess It didn’t really matter if it was relevant or not. The teachers told us to memorize a few of those introductions for essay exams and then when they gave you a topic you decided which one fits better and you used that. We really didn’t look at introduction as an important part of the text that should . . . *introduce* the topic and the line you’re following. We never looked . . . *I* never looked at it that way. They never taught us that. (Ava’s interview, April 2007, emphasis original)

Marjan stated that she was first sensitized to the organizational aspect of her papers through the feedback she received from a bilingual Persian-English tutor who provided her with editorial assistance for her course papers when she started her Ph.D. program. She explained:

بعد نهایتاً هم یه نفر که تقریباً بایلینگوال فارسی انگلیسی بود تو دانشگاه همه پیپرمو برام چک کرد و من فهمیدم که چطور اصلاً متوجه نشده بودم که خیلی از مطالبم به هم ربط منطقی نداره، خیلی جاها حرفای اضافی و نامربوط زدم، به قول اون همش توجاده خاکی زدم (میخندد) همش بهم میگفت اینو چرا اینجا آوردی؟ چه ربطی به موضوع اصلی داره؟ چه ربطی به مطلب قبلی داره؟ چی میخوای بگی اینجا؟ این جمله معنی اش چیه؟ چرا این این جاست؟ این ایده باید قبل از این باشه. . . تازه من اون موقع فهمیدم که خیلی از چیزایی که به نظر خودم برای مطرح کردن موضوع لازم بود تو انگلیسی میشد خاکی رفتن! من فکر میکردم یه نکته‌هایی که میخوندم برای بحث جالبه ولی وقتی بهم میگفت این دقیقاً چه ربطی به موضوع اصلی داره توش میموند. فهمیدم فقط اینکه چیز جالبی میگی یا نه مهم نیست: شکل مرتب کردنش و کنار هم گذاشتنش حتی شاید مهمتره. بعداً هم دیدم استادام خیلی حساسن رو این قضیه.

Later on someone who was almost bilingual in Persian and English here at the university checked all my papers, and I came to realize that I had been totally oblivious to the fact that a lot of what I had written was not logically related; in many places I'd written redundant and irrelevant things. As she put it, I had gone off on tangent (laughs). She kept saying why are you saying this here? What's the relevance to the main topic? What has it got to do with the previous

statement? What are you trying to say here? Why is this sentence here? This idea should go before this one here . . . It was only then that I realized many of the things that I thought were necessary to state the case were not necessary and that in English they would be considered going off the tangent. I used to think that many of the things that I would read were relevant for the discussion, but when she kept asking what their relevance to the main topic was, I was at a loss to explain. I came to realize that whether you are saying something interesting or not was not important: how you organized them and put them together might be more important. Later on I saw that the professors were sensitive about it. (Marjan's interview, April 2006)

An examination of academic writing handbooks and documents produced by various centers for academic writing across North America (e.g., Harvard University Writing Center; University of Toronto Writing Centre) indicates that writers' focus on a clearly stated thesis statement or main idea followed by key points that are directly relevant to the thesis are the defining features of acceptable organizational structure in academic writing in English. This institutional expectation, which incidentally invokes yet another acceptability criterion of essayist literacy (Lillis, 1999, 2003), was brought up by all the three faculty members interviewed in this study when queried about what they would consider a successful "A" paper. One professor described her desirable academic paper as one in which the student:

[D]emonstrates evidence of lucid thinking, which basically means a clear presentation of ideas, a clear line of reasoning to support the main point without digressing to irrelevant points. I mean congruency and relevancy is

absolutely important in a good paper. You've got to support the ideas you put forward through evidence from works of others and at the same time bring in your own voice in a unique way. I'd say it's all about that unique voice. I want to hear it loud and clear in the paper, without having to look for it back and forth among many pages of disintegrated thoughts. (Professor Watson's interview, June 2005)

All the faculty members interviewed stated that they were surprised to find out many of their second language graduate students did not seem to recognize the importance of preparing an outline before beginning to write. Professor Shay had noticed this was an especially common problem with ESL graduate students from certain educational backgrounds. She was convinced that embarking on writing tasks without a clear "road map" or an outline would lead to ineffective organization of student papers. I received the following email from Sepideh in which she mentioned some of the problems her professor had identified in a draft of a paper she had submitted:

Table 5. *A sample communication with student participants*

Date: Sat 7 Apr 11:43:21 EDT 2007
 From: [REDACTED] [Add To Address Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)
 Subject: some ideas on my papers and writings
 To: nakbaris@umd.edu

Dear Nahal,
 I hope you enjoy your time and winter in the spring!
 [REDACTED] is ready to go our friend's house for sleep over.
 Tomorrow they invited us for egg hunts and other events...
 One of my teachers returned a paper. I noted some points
 that may helps. The paper was on a book which is recently
 published. I used two books as secondary sources. The
 problems were:
 Organization: I wrote a sentence at the end which it was
 better to be written in the beginning. Shift of the
 paragraphs were not smooth. They were abrupt. I did not
 make a good transition.
 Unclear statements: some of my paragraphs did not make
 sense. I didn't make my point clear
 My problem with and & the seems to have no end.
 I left the sentences unexplained. For example, I wrote:
 "they left the house" They left the house to do what? to
 go where?
 I am working on this paper. After finishing I will give it
 you.
 What makes me happy is that now I cite well. This was my
 biggest concern.
 Best,
 [REDACTED]

Professor Kaviani, for his part, identified his Iranian students as one group commonly displaying “organizational problems” in their papers. He suggested:

One of the main difficulties I see is that [these students] fail to develop their papers in a consistent fashion. I mean in terms of the structure of the paper it's as if they lose sight of it halfway through. That's why we keep telling them the first step . . . one of the initial steps should be preparing an outline if you want to hand in a coherent, well-organized paper. (Professor Kaviani's interview, June 2007)

Contrary to what was perceived to be a common practice or a necessary step in writing a paper, the students in this study clearly stated that they did not systematically

plan the organizational structure of their papers before starting to write; instead they would decide to include or exclude points during the writing process.

Amir, for example, explained that he was not used to writing from an outline despite the fact that his friends and peer tutors who read and commented on his papers had often encouraged him to do so. He was reluctant to accept that preparing an outline would help improve his writing, preferring instead to “just start writing” and “let the paper take a life of its own”. He said he would normally go back at the end of the process and change the place of some of the components or add or delete whole paragraphs. “I guess that’s the point where I can say what the outline of my paper is, not the other way round!” (Amir’s interview, May 2005). In fact, Amir did not think highly of writing from an outline:

راستشو بگم به نظرم اینجوری نوشتن خیلی فرمولی میشه. متننت میشه یه متن بیمزه؛ قابل پیش بینیه قشنگ که بعدش چی میخواد بیاد. فکر میکنم اون چیزی که حالا ادیتور یا استادها بهش میگن حاشیه رفتن اصلش یه جور بیان کردن نظرمه که اتفاقا مربوط هم هست چون مثلا میگم که موضوع چطور به بحثای دیگه ربط پیدا میکنه از نظر من. فکر کنم این خودش یه جورایی بحثو باز میکنه. میبردش به جهتای دیگه که هم فلکسیبل تره هم جالبتره. میدونی چی میگم؟ ولی خوب اینجا یه جور دیگه است چیزی که میخوان تو بیپر.

To tell you the truth, I think [starting with an outline] makes writing so formulaic; very dull, very predictable! I think what my editors or professors call digression is

actually a way of expressing my idea of how I think the topic is linked to other issues or other subjects. I think in a way it widens the discussion. It opens other possibilities. I think . . . it is more flexible this way, more interesting. You know what I mean? But I guess here things are different, they want different things in the papers. (Amir's interview, May 2005)

Professors and writing tutors very often responded to texts that failed to meet their expectations in terms of organizational structure by providing corrective feedback either on the margins or at the end of the papers. The following is a paragraph from a study design paper that Marjan had written as one of the requirements of an SLA course as a Ph.D. student before she switched to an M.A. program in her department, due to circumstances that will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. This fifteen-page paper proposed a study of recasts (an error correction mechanism used by teachers) and their effect on learning in a language classroom.

On more than one occasion comments such as “What’s the point here?”, “What has this got to do with recasts?”, “Needs clarification” and “Idea not fully developed” could be seen on the paper margin. As a case in point, on page 3 of the paper, Marjan had started a paragraph with the following sentence:

Although studies show that recasts are less effective than other types of feedback, the role of recasts as a component of form-focused instruction has been of interest in second language acquisition research (Marjan's paper, p.3)

The professor had underlined the phrase “other types of feedback”, and her note next to this paragraph read: “Which? You haven’t discussed them. Needs to be further

developed”. In the same paper, a note next to another paragraph deemed it “Not coherent”:

According to UG, negative evidence is not a source of learning; hence, the efficacy of recasts may not be due to their negativity. If they are fruitful, it is because they are positive evidence. Further, Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis (1990) holds that learners must notice new linguistic features in order to acquire them. The role of recasts is then to open up the opportunity for learners to compare the new linguistic forms the learners have been exposed to with the forms they have made use of in their interlanguage to convey their intended meaning. (Marjan’s SLA paper, p. 5)

When asked to reflect on this paragraph and the feedback she had received on it in retrospect, Marjan said:

ربطشون تو ذهن خودم کاملاً مشخصه. اینا که گفتم جنبه‌های مختلف یه موضوعن. من اینجا از ربط ریکست و نوٹیسینگ حرف نزدم چون فکر میکنم خیلی بدیهیه. فکر کنم مشکل من اینه که یه سری چیزا رو توی ذهن خودم بسطش میدم ولی روی کاغذ نمیارمشون چون فکر میکنم . . . یا به اشتباه فکر میکنم که واضحه. اگه ایده‌ها رو اینجوری تو هوا ول کنی به نظر میاد تو انگلیسی اذیت میکنه. خوندنش سخت میشه.

The link among these ideas are clear in my mind. They are different sides of an issue. I guess my problem is that I’ve developed part of the idea in my own mind without putting them down on paper because I assumed... I wrongly assumed they were obvious. If you leave some of the ideas

in the air it seems the text bothers [the readers] in English.
It becomes difficult to read.

One interesting point to note in the reflections of both Amir and Marjan is that they point out that expectations regarding organizational structure and coherence of writing are specific to North America and the English language, which is evident in their reference to “here they expect you . . .” and “in English they expect you . . .”. This indicates that both of these participants perceive a difference between the two languages, educational contexts and literate traditions.

Explicit Transition: “I Don’t Quite Get Why It’s So Important!”

Closely associated with textual development and organization, another characterizing feature of essayist literacy is explicit marking of logical relationships among propositions (Farr, 1993; Lillis, 2001; Scollon & Scollon, 1981). The participants reported that it was clearly indicated to them on different occasions that they were expected to include explicit signals of transition from one idea to the next in order to display the logical links among the sentences and paragraphs they wrote. Similar to the previously discussed features of academic writing, the students in this study recalled that the importance of using explicit transition markers was not highlighted in their background writing experience. Sepideh, for instance, recounted the following in reference to the need to put in transition markers in her course papers:

When my professor first said to me I need to use transition [signals] all the time I didn’t quite get why I had to do it - honestly I still don’t get why it’s so important and I don’t know the reason for so much emphasis on this . . . I can’t

do it well all the time- but what I know is that you shouldn't just leave your paragraphs without linking them, you have to show those links to people. I find that one of tricky prospect [sic] of writing. (Sepideh's interview, April 2006)

Similarly, Nina would find using explicit transitions in writing very difficult:

ولی بیشترین چیزی که من دیدم و خودم مشکل داشتم این بود که . . . نوشته‌هام کلمه‌هایی که پیوستگی رو نشون بده نداشت . آره، مثلاً من یه موضوع تو ذهنم بود اونو می داشتم بعد تو ذهنم یه فکر دیگه‌ای می کردم و بعد یه بند دیگه می نوشتم ولی اون فکر اون وسط با کلمه یا عبارت خاصی به هم ربط نداده بودم... میدونی؟ در صورتی که همش بهم میگن که باید اونو حتماً بیارم تا خواننده بتونه "ترین آو تات" منو دنبال کنه. همین مشکلو توی پرزنتیشن هم دارم یعنی توی یه بند یا یه اسلاید یه چیزی میگم ولی نمیتونم به راحتی ربط اونو به بندای بعدی . . . نمی تونم نشون بدم شاید با یه جمله کوتاه بشه این کار رو کرد ولی من خیلی وارد نیستم توش. اصلاً روش این کارو رو تو زبان اولم یاد نگرفتم . به ما هیچ وقت یاد ندادن اصلاً. من اصلاً یادم نمیاد که متنی خونده باشم به فارسی و به این قضیه توش توجه کرده باشم.

But one thing that I've noticed and I had problems with was that . . . what I wrote didn't have the words that showed cohesion. Yeah, for instance, I had a topic in mind which I'd write out, then I'd have a different thought in my mind, and I'd go on and write another paragraph, without linking the two ideas with a word or a phrase . . . you see what I mean? And I'm always being told to put that word in so that the reader can follow my "train of thought". I have the same problem in my presentations, I mean, I say

something in one slide or paragraph but I can't quite link it up with the next slide or . . . I'm not good at it. I didn't learn how to do it in my first language. I can't remember reading a text in Persian and paying any attention to this.
(Nina's interview, May 2005)

The faculty pointed out that they expected to see transition markers in student papers. The following excerpt is from an assessment criteria sheet from one of the course outlines in which, in addition to other evaluative criteria, the students are reminded of the need to use transition markers:

Are there helpful introductory paragraphs, topic sentences, transition sentences, summary sentences/paragraphs throughout the paper? Are transition devices used effectively to link up the ideas in a smooth manner?
[Literature Course outline, Writing Assessment Criteria]

The next two themes, awareness of the rhetorical context of writing and the structure of argumentation will be discussed in much more detail because of the significant role they seem to play in North American academic literacy practices.

Unfamiliar Territory: The Rhetorical Context of Academic Writing

Early in her graduate school experience in North America, Marjan had realized that she could not handle the writing assignments without seeking help from someone who would sit with her and spend an extended amount of time with her going over her texts. Marjan's case was in a way different from the other Iranian graduate students in the study since English had never been a major component of the undergraduate and graduate programs she had completed back in Iran. She explained that her field of study, teaching

Persian to speakers of other languages, included some theoretical readings on language acquisition and teaching methods in English, but there were very few English writing requirements. For this reason, the numerous writing assignments and term papers she had to submit in English for her courses presented a major challenge to her that she had realized she could not take on all by herself. As part of her research assistantship contract, in addition to teaching Persian, she also worked in another department on campus. She collaborated with a team working on a Persian language project supervised by an American linguist fluent in Persian, named Nadia (a pseudonym). Marjan had told me on several occasions that the assistance and feedback she received from this colleague, who had also worked as a writing tutor at academic writing centers for a number of years, was extremely helpful. Marjan had regular meetings with Nadia to discuss her writing projects. Reflecting on the help she received from Nadia, Marjan explained that:

اصلاً نمیدونم بدون نادیاچیکار باید میکردم. شانس آوردم باهاش آشنا شدم
واقعاً. از حرف زدن با نادیا کلی چیزا یاد گرفتم درباره مثلاً انواع رایتینگ
که استادها میخواستن حالا مثل ریدینگ ریسپانس مثلاً یا پزیشن پیپر یا ستادی
دیزاین یا چیزای دیگه. اولش درست نمیدونستم اینا فرقشون با هم چیه. واسه
همشون فقط میخوندم. کلی میخوندم و بعدشم هرچی میومد به ذهنم مینوشتم.
باید پیپرامو قبل از اینکه با نادیا روشن کار کنم و بعدش ببینی. بهت نشون
میدم حالا . . . ولی خوب خیلی سختگیره. بعضی وقتا بهم میگه این چرت و
پرتا چیه نوشتی (خنده). ولی خداییش خیلی ازش چیز یاد میگیرم.

I don't know what I would have done without her... I guess
I was really lucky to meet her. I learned so much from just

talking with her about the different kinds of writing that professors asked for like reading response or position paper or study design. I had no idea how they were different from each other. For all of them I just read and read and then put on paper everything that came to my mind. You should see my papers before I talk to her and after I talk to her. I'll show them to you...But she is tough! She sometimes tells me 'what's all this nonsense you've written?' (laughs) . . . but honestly I learn so much from her. (Marjan's interview, April 2006)

Marjan and I worked in the same department since she arrived in the U.S. on a scholarship from the host university to do a doctoral program in SLA and work as a teaching assistant at the Persian department. Our conversations about writing extended far beyond the interview sessions. She often shared with me her experiences with writing, her biggest challenge in the doctoral program. Marjan called me one day, asking if I was interested in attending a session she had just arranged with Nadia, her peer, tutor in the afternoon. They were going to meet at Marjan's apartment to go over the first draft of a paper she was working on to present at a student conference in a couple of weeks. This was a great opportunity for me to observe a "talk-around-the-text" session (Leander & Prior, 2004) where the interaction of talk and text in a situated practice could (re)shape the rhetorical structure of written text.

The theme of the upcoming conference, "Voices and Silences", had intrigued Marjan to work on a topic that had little relevance to her field of study, but she was personally very passionate about. In a talk entitled "A writer's martyrdom: A voice that wouldn't be erased" she planned to talk about the work of an Iranian writer and journalist who, as a disillusioned supporter of the Islamic Republic, had been arrested after openly

criticizing the government and the supreme leader of Iran. Marjan had conducted a discourse analysis of a collection of this political dissident's letters addressed to the Supreme Leader, which were widely circulated after his suspicious death in prison.

Before starting to work on the paper, they described their routine in these sessions. Nadia explained that rather than reading the draft in advance of their meetings and commenting on it, whenever they had enough time, she preferred that they read the text in small sections when they were together so that they could talk about it as they went along. They both had their laptops in front of them and worked with the digital file rather than a hard copy of the text. Nadia reasoned that she liked this approach better as she could "delete and add and cut and past, without leaving [Marjan] with too many red marks and unintelligible notes on her hands at the end of the day!"

The opening lines in the first draft of the presentation's text that Marjan shared with Nadia in their one-on-one meeting read as follows:

Saidi Sirjani was a prominent Iranian writer, poet, and
historian, whose literary works were not allowed under
both the Shah's regime and the Islamic Republic"
(Marjan's presentation text, 1st draft)

As Nadia started editing the text, changing words, restructuring sentences, and so on, she explained to Marjan that one important thing she had to learn was an awareness of the audience. Occasionally switching back and forth between Persian and English in their conversation, at one point she told Marjan:

Listen, you need to know who your audience is, what they
know and don't know about the topic . . . why should they
care at all. If I am a person who has never heard of Sirjani,

Shah or others, then this is not going to work for me. You lost me right at the beginning. (Observation notes, Nadia and Marjan's tutorial session, February 2007)

After talking about the introductory paragraph for a few minutes, they settled on the following introductory paragraph, which incorporates more background information with a particular audience in mind:

The Iran of the 1990's was a particularly difficult period for Iranian writers. The nation was marked by severe political suppression. No public discourse that might be deemed at all critical was tolerated at the time. In this presentation we will look at the example of a writer's effort to overcome the stifling of expression and enquiry. Saidi Sirjani (1931-1994) was a prominent Iranian writer, poet, and historian, whose literary works were banned under both the Shah's regime (1941-1979) and that of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979-present). (Marjan's presentation text, 2nd draft)

Nadia then continued to explain the changes she had suggested to Marjan, trying to make sure she knew why they were necessary. She went on to add that:

Your American audience does not like ambiguity. Right from the beginning, they need to know why they are listening to you and what they are going to take away when you're done. They won't be patient with you, گوش میکنی چی میگم؟ [Are you following me?] They want to feel secure and safe in your hands. They want to know what they should expect, and at the end, you are accountable to tell them, you need to say explicitly to them that 'OK, here's what I promised to deliver, and as you can see, I've delivered it'. Many Iranians I work with do not do this. They don't pay

attention to this because Persian is not like that. You guys just leave it to the reader to figure out things fill in the blanks. (Observation notes, Nadia and Marjan's tutorial session, February 2007)

What Nadia notes here about Iranian writers' tendency to leave ambiguity in their texts is in fact reminiscent of a typological distinction between writer-responsible and reader-responsible languages (Hinds, 1987, 1990) in contrastive rhetoric. Hinds argues that the roles of writers and readers can be different across languages and cultures depending on the degree to which writers are expected to avoid ambiguity in their texts, as opposed to the extent to which readers have to make inferential bridges to understand and interpret texts.

Marjan kept nodding in agreement as she listened to Nadia. She then read the whole paragraph again, and remarked to Nadia in Persian, "It looks much better now. It really does. I see your point. I'll keep it in mind". (Observation notes, Nadia and Marjan's tutorial session, February 2007). She had clearly noticed yet another aspect of writing that she was previously not aware of.

The exchange in the tutoring session described above is an instance of an issue raised in many of the interviews, and highlighted by professors in their reactions to student papers. A considerable degree of unfamiliarity with the rhetorical context of writing on the part of the students was obviously a concern for faculty, and students had noted that through the feedback they had received. At various points during the interviews the students hinted that they struggled with identifying what some of their writing assignments were specifically asking for, who they were supposed to address, and what purposes they were supposed to serve. Students had realized from the professors'

instructions and course outlines that it was important to write in response to the rhetorical context of writing, but they did not seem to know exactly how to accomplish that. As another case in point, one of the documents that Ava shared with me was an evaluation grid prepared by one of her professors to describe and later evaluate a six page position paper for an English Literature course. The guidelines encouraged the student to choose a style of writing that “makes the greatest impact on the reader as a statement of your position, and demonstrates sensitivity to audience, subject and occasion” (Writing assignment evaluation grid, Literature course). Ava complained that she had a hard time understanding and following this requirement of the assignments. For this reason she had turned to her American classmates, who were much more at ease with construing the particular audience the paper was supposed to address. She said they were able to help her with some concrete, clear ideas for the purpose:

The best advice I got was from one of my classmates who I remember told me imagine you’re writing this in response to a question by a freshman student of literature who is asking you why she should adopt this particular approach in her critique of *Madam Bovary* rather than another approach. Just imagine you sit with her and tell her what you think is best and why. (Ava’s interview, April 2007)

One of the more interesting points raised by Ava was that she had been told by a professor on a few occasions that certain problems she demonstrated in her writing such as little demonstration of sensitivity to audience “would be acceptable at the undergrad level, but certainly not at the Ph.D. level” (Ava’s interview, April 2007). To Ava’s mind this was a clear indication that starting the graduate school in North America is not the best choice for international ESL students “no matter how good their English is”, since

there are so many things that they do not know about the expectations. She was convinced that:

People who go to college or do their BA here are much better off compared to us. I don't think even the U.K. experience prepared me for writing in grad school here. The best thing is to start from the beginning, if you have the time and money, of course! (Ava's interview, April 2007)

Ava believed that writing was taken much more seriously in the U.S. and the expectations were much more clearly demarcated. She said graduate students here seemed to have a deeper and more extensive knowledge of academic writing conventions, and there seemed to be more mechanisms in place to make sure that students are socialized into the essayist literacy tradition. Ava believed, therefore, that her experience in graduate school in the U.K. did little to prepare her for the writing demands of the Ph.D. program she had started in the U.S.

Ava's experience corroborates the comparison that some authors have drawn between academic writing instruction in the context of higher education in the U.K. and North America (Lillis, 2001; Russell, 1990; Russell & Yoo, 2001). Lillis (2001), for example, points out that there are striking differences between the British and American institutional contexts in terms of writing research and pedagogy. For instance, "freshman composition", "basic writing", or "writing across the curriculum" courses are not part of universal requirements at the undergraduate level in British institutions of higher education. Instead, whenever there is a need for particular attention to writing pedagogy, it is offered in the form of individualized or small group tutoring for the most part, and

“the teaching of writing continues neither to be formalized through specific provision nor, indeed, until recently, to receive explicit pedagogical attention” (Lillis, 2003, p. 26).

The point here is that students’ prior educational experiences upon their entry into graduate school in North America play a significant role in the way they construe academic writing, and that the starting point of many students in comparison to their North American peers who have done part or all of their education within this system vary considerably.

For most Iranian students like Marjan making the transition from secondary to post-secondary education in their home country is a centralized process. A nation-wide standardized test known as the National Admission Exam (locally called *Konkur*) screens applicants to Iranian colleges and universities. Admission to Iranian institutions of higher education in general does not involve the procedures that students in North America go through, namely, applying to individual academic institutions, taking certain tests such as SAT or GRE with major writing components, or even submitting a Statement of Intent and a cover letter with applications packages. For this reason writing an academic essay with a particular goal for a particular audience in an authentic (not classroom) situation, might not necessarily be part of the literacy experience of Iranian students even in their first language. Differences of this kind can partly account for their general unfamiliarity with the requirements of certain rhetorical contexts when Iranian students first commence graduate school here in North America. These differences result in a significant disparity between the educational experiences of many second language writers like Marjan and Ava and their North American peers. International students originating from different educational systems and rhetorical traditions may be less attuned to the rhetorical

dimension of academic writing when compared to their peers. Indeed the different social worlds that they come from and the different roles that literate activity in these social worlds in their home and host countries play are believed to be the source of some of the literacy practices observed in cross-cultural student writing (Prior & Shipka, 2003; Shen, 1989; Street, 1995).

The professors in this study indeed expected student writers to be sensitive to the exigencies of context in terms of the focus, the purpose, and the audience of their papers. They believed that such an awareness of the rhetorical context was directly linked to the appropriateness of the content as well as structural and organizational choices in writing. One faculty member described the importance of context awareness as follows:

What [you] need to know first and foremost is what is it that you're writing, why you're writing it, and who you're writing it for. I think the greatest weakness in the writings or class presentations of some non-English students is that they do not organize their ideas clearly for their particular audience because they don't have a clear answer to those questions I just raised. (Professor Shay's interview, August 2007)

In order to draw students' attention to the specific context of writing, the faculty would often refer to a particular function of academic writing in their course outlines, written feedback on student papers, and in their response to some of the interview questions in this study. They would point out that one important function of academic writing is to construct an argument that meets readers' expectations within particular disciplinary communities. In light of the central role of argumentation in academic literacy, the next section is devoted to a detailed account of the perceptions and textual

practices of second language writers with regards to argumentative papers, and the faculty responses to such papers.

Argumentative Writing as a Site for Confusion: "I Look at the Guidelines and I'm Totally Lost!"

As discussed earlier, the student writers generally did not go much beyond the five paragraph essay in expressing their understanding of academic writing. When queried about their views about argumentative writing and its place in the literate activities of graduate school, the students indicated their understandings of this function of writing as follows:

من فکر کنم آرگيومنت يه نظر شخصيه. يعنى اينكه اونچه كه به نظرت
مهمه درباره يه چيزى بگى بيشتتر به نظرم . . . اصلش . . . چطور بگم . . .
ديدگاهته ؛ يعنى اون چيزى كه ميخواي توضيح بدى. بعدشم ادامه اش با
چيزايى كه فكر ميكنى گفتنش مهمه. آخرشم تمام اون ايده ها رو بايد ربط
بدى به هم توى پيپر. من الان ديگه فهميدم كه خيلى هم مهمه كه همش
رفرنس بدى تو كارت كه مثلا ديگران چي گفتن درباره اين موضوع.

I think an argument is a personal opinion; it means saying what I feel is important to say about something. It is more like...basically... your views; what you are trying to explain and... [you] then go on talking about what you think is important to be mentioned and finally link all those ideas together in your paper. Now I know that it's also very important to include many references on the topic in your

paper, like, what others have said about the topic. (Amir's interview, May 2005)

Nina, the other Master's student, explained her understanding of argumentative writing as follows:

خوب من فکر میکنم یعنی این که یه ایده ای رو که می تونه مخالف هم داشته باشه . . . اون ایده رو بگیری و اون وقت اون قد بکاپ کنی که یه چیزی بشه . . . یعنی نظر خودتو ثابت کنی فکر کنم اون ایده میشه تیسس سیتیمنت و کار بک آپ کردنش با لیترچر میشه ارگيومنت.

I think [an argument] means taking an idea which can of course have opponents . . . you take that idea and then you back it up as much as you can until you get somewhere . . . I mean . . . you've got to prove your point right. I think that the idea is your thesis statement and the act of backing up with the literature is an argument" (Nina's interview, May 2005)

These explanations suggest that the way students understood argumentation did not quite match the way the faculty understood it, namely, the need for making a warranted claim and supporting it with evidence and bringing in one's unique voice into the discussion, hence meaningfully participating in the scholarly conversation in the field. The analysis of the criteria that faculty members referred to in talking about their expectations of writing at graduate level to a great extent paralleled the components of a theory of argumentation elaborated by Toulmin (1964/2003). Examining the professors'

feedback on student writing further corroborated the fact that professors were often either implicitly or explicitly looking for many of these argumentative components in student papers. This is not to suggest that content area professors commonly think in terms of the components of an analytical model when they read and evaluate their students' papers. Rather, the point is that their responses followed elements of what Toulmin conceives of as the criteria for "soundness of substantive argumentation" (Toulmin, 2001).

Many of the documents such as course outlines and evaluation grids that professors made available to their students demonstrated a set of expectations that had the elements of Toulmin's commonly known model of argumentation built into them in some ways. The following are some illustrative examples:

Example 1

You will write a paper (10-12 pages) that argues for a certain learning theory supporting arts-based learning. Within the paper, explore the degree to which the theory confirms intrinsic (arts content) and extrinsic (non-arts) learning through experiential arts activities. [. . .]. You are expected to support your claims with sound reasoning and an appropriate balance of relevant, sufficient evidence from previous research and your own experience. Sample experiential activities should be referenced to back up your position.

(Source: Course outline, Arts Education course)

Example 2

Here are some key elements to be considered when doing the readings, preparing for class discussions and writing research papers:

1. What is the author's main argument?
2. What are the main or primary points made the author?
3. What assumptions underpin the author's argument?
4. What evidence does the author use to support the claims s/he makes (e.g., work of other authors, etc)?
5. What are the implications of the author's argument?
6. How does the author's argument differ from or parallel the claims made by other authors?
7. Are there any ideas presented, or claims made by the author, that can be applied to other contexts or settings? If not, why? If yes, give examples.

(Source: Evaluation sheet, Education course)

Example 3**Evaluative criteria for final paper****Potential marks (out of 25)**

Thesis/Claim - (your response to the question):

<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
Low				High

Clear, focused on topic, takes a position

Your Argument:

<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
Low				High

supports thesis throughout essay

identifies the central issues

is consistent, logical, coherent, persuasive

shows evidence of lucid thinking

Analysis/synthesis of key concepts:

<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
Low				High

contextual analysis not dictionary definitions

critique/integration

Appropriateness

<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
Low				High

Congruency, relevancy

Originality

<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
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Low				High
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Uniqueness, inventiveness

(Source: Evaluation sheet, Education course)

Instances of failing to meet the professor's expectation in terms of constructing a coherent argument could be observed in the feedback that Sepideh, the literature Ph.D. student received on her papers early on in her Ph.D. program. As a writing requirement for one of her courses that focused on American transcendentalism, she had written a short position paper. At the end of the four-page paper the professor had noted:

I'm left unsure of what your main point and your actual position is... yes, Fuller was both an early feminist and a transcendentalist, but these are historical observations, not arguments. It would be difficult, in other words, to dispute these claims. They look like facts to me rather than arguments. What are you arguing? What insight about Fuller are you bringing in that is new to your reader?
(Professor's comments on Sepideh's Literature course term paper)

Comments such as "What is this supposed to buy you here?", "Relevance?" and "ideas underdeveloped" next to different paragraphs in the text all pointed at the student's unsatisfactory performance in this argumentative paper.

Another illustrative example is the following introductory paragraph of a paper written by Sepideh for Professor Shay's Literature course, and the detailed commentary on the margin of the paragraph.

Mingshui Cai in her book, *Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults Reflection on Critical Issues*, poses a question: "Can outsiders rely on imagination to create a culturally authentic books [sic] about cultures other than their own?" (xix). *Les Ombres de Ghadames* was written by a French journalist Joelle Stolz as her first novel in 1999. Catherine Temerson translated the book into English in 2005. The book won the Mildred L. Batchelder Award in 2005 (Sepideh's Literature term paper, March 2006)

In her feedback next to this paragraph, the professor has underlined the second sentence and commented:

The relationship between this sentence and the previous sentence is unclear. In the introduction you want to state a thesis that you are arguing. For example, in this essay I plan to demonstrate that a writer who does her homework and uses her imagination can effectively write about other cultures. It is critical to state the main thesis or argument of your essay in the first paragraph normally towards the end. The rest of the essay will make your case. So, an [sic] effect you are like a lawyer ‘arguing’ for the validity of your thesis. (Professor Shay’s feedback on Sepideh’s paper)

Reflecting on her observations of Sepideh and other second language writers she had worked with at the Ph.D. level, professor Shay said argumentative writing posed more of a challenge to international students than American students in her opinion:

I think some students don’t know how to tackle the argumentative genre. From my experience, international students have a hard time making a case or supporting a stance in their papers through a sustained argument. It’s fair to say I’ve seen this in the writings of my American students too. But it’s clearly much more challenging for non-English students. I mean, you can hardly define some of those papers as argumentative; they’re merely repetitions of other arguments, or just unsupported stance takings. Graduate school is all about argumentation. You expect a Ph.D. student to know the ABC’s of that at least. When they don’t, it’s really a problem. (Professor Shay’s interview, August 2007)

Still another instance of experiencing problems with argumentative writing could be observed in one of Nina’s term papers and the feedback it had elicited. During the

semester prior to her participation in this study, Nina had taken the course referred to in Example 1 above. Her mark on the 18 page paper she had written was a B- , and the following comments from her professor at the end of the paper clearly addressed some of the expectations in terms of the quality of the argument she had failed to meet:

Nina, this is potentially an interesting and creative reflection on the use of MI [multiple intelligences] theory. Be careful, however, *not to over-state your case through making claims that you leave unsupported*. For example, journal writing can develop linguistic and intra-personal intelligence but being presented as an individual activity here, I cannot see how it can develop inter-personal communication. Also, you need to *support* your application of MI theory with some *reference to the literature*, either Gardner's work or other researchers who have demonstrated how MI can be effectively used in a certain learning environment. (Feedback on Nina's paper, emphasis added)

In the feedback on the following sentence from the same paper, for instance, the professor had circled the word "thus" and put a question mark over the word, signaling that she questioned the warrant linking the claim and the ground, and the student's choice of the discourse marker to represent the link. The sentence read:

Intelligence is biological as we have [a] brain, and at the same time it is psychological as we have [a] mind, thus we use our brain, mind and our potentials to solve problems and make things. (Nina's paper, for the Art Education course, p.7)

And the professor's comment was:

You don't sound convincing here... how can you come up with the problem solving conclusion based on the biological and psychological nature of intelligence?"
(Feedback on Nina's paper)

When queried about the feedback she had received on the argument she was presenting here, Nina's response was clearly indicative of a flawed understanding of the appropriate logical connector, and an apparently unsuccessful attempt, in her words, to "create relevance" between the ideas. While it might be counter-argued that documents such as the course outline and assessment grids provide students with guidelines and describe the expectations, or that students can always seek help from writing centers, the data from this particular aspect of the study suggest that the picture is far more complicated for second language writers. Nina, for instance, explained:

I look at comments like this one and I'm totally lost! I don't know about others, but for me it's not easy to understand what exactly they mean by this or some things they tell you to do in the course outline, like they say it has to be coherent, but how? Everything has to be relevant, but how? This one here [referring to the paragraph in question], what does Paul [the professor] mean here? I think it's relevant but he says it's not. (Nina's interview, May 2005)

A more detailed discussion of "the institutional practice of mystery" (Lillis, 2001) involved here and the confusion associated with this practice for many student writers will be presented in the next chapter.

Professor Kaviani, the bilingual Persian/English faculty member, referred to some particular features that, in his opinion, made the argumentative writings of his Iranian students unsuccessful. He mentioned the incorporation of rebuttals and modal qualifiers

as two components of an acceptable argument that he believed were almost always missing from his Iranian students' texts. He attributed this to the differences in the attitudes of Iranian and American students nurtured in two different social and educational contexts:

You know, one of the flaws of the arguments of my Iranian students and I think the logic in Persian language is that you never give the light of day to the person you oppose. You even *falsify* them and you think you're in the right in doing so. I keep telling my students that they need to tone down the claims they are making and the positions they're offering through appropriate hedging, through speaking tentatively rather than deterministically. But their attitude is different. You see that they [Iranian students] come from a background of accepting rather than questioning. I think the ability to question dogma and the received ideas, and at the same time giving other opinions the benefit of the doubt is greater in my American students than in many Iranian students. The attitude of constant questioning seems to be nurtured more here than in Iran. (Professor Kaviani's interview, June 2007)

The questioning of authority versus accepting the authoritative word referred to by this professor here translated into another feature in the participants' texts that elicited reflections and feedback from the professors. This epistemological stance and its implications for student writing practices will be discussed next.

Epistemological Underpinning of Academic Arguments

The question of accepting authority without questioning was another issue that all the three faculty members interviewed in this study pointed out. Uncritical appropriation

of published authority, they all agreed, was a visible aspect of many international students including those participating in this study. One faculty member, for instance, characterized this missing feature in the following terms:

All of us teachers expect our graduate students to talk back to us and talk back to the texts, you know. I don't see my Iranian students do that or know how to do that at first.
(Professor Kaviani's interview, June, 2007)

In fact, prior research has shown that this uncritical acceptance is not unique to any particular cohort of students, rather it is an integral aspect of the learning process for all students across the board (Abasi & Graves, 2008; Angélil-Carter, 2000; Stotsky, 1991; Thesen, 1994, 1997). It has been shown that as students are socialized into their disciplines, they gradually begin to move away from a univocal treatment of what they read toward a dialogic encounter with them. While they initially uncritically appropriate the words of the other, they sooner or later begin to see texts as site for dialogue, and sources become authored claims to knowledge subject to critical evaluation (Boughey, 2000; Geisler, 1994; Haneda & Wells, 2000; Penrose & Geisler, 1994). The same pattern was quite evident in the literate attitudes that the students in this study hold toward writing in academia as well as in the papers that they had produced.

A highly interesting and insightful interview session in this study was an in-depth joint conversation session that I had with Sepideh and Professor Shay together in addition to the individual interviews that I had with them separately. One early afternoon, the three of us got together at Professor Shay's place to meet over tea and talk about their views and experiences of writing in graduate school in general, particularly focusing on the courses that Sepideh had been taking with her.

During this conversation, Professor Shay and Sepideh described to me the very first paper, titled “The shadow of Ghademes”, that Sephideh had written for Professor Shay’s Multicultural Novel seminar. As we talked about the paper, the issue of authoritative treatment of source texts came up as follows:

Sepideh: The first time that I wrote one of my papers for Dr. Shay, it wasn’t clear for me to know what I was asked for. Some of [her comments on the paper] were for grammar some of them were for the argument. For example the novel that we are talking about the Shadows of Ghadamas, I wanted to make sure how was the author? If the author is biased or not? And . . .

Shay: But I would like to say that the first paper that you did I felt that you were too respectful of things that were given. You know? (they both laugh) just because somebody gets an award for a book, that does not mean that it is a good book . . . So, actually I wanted you to be more critical, more challenging. I wanted you to look beyond the surface . . . [turns around to me] I wanted her not to be intimidated by the written word the published word. I think I had her rewrite almost all of the paper. Right?

Sepideh: That’s right. For example she wrote me [sic] don’t just summarize other theories.

Shay: Yeah. I felt you needed more practice in developing your argument and, you know, first of all learning how to formulate an argument and then get into more in depth discussion of your ideas.

Nahal: Sepideh, I know you’ve been to graduate school back in Iran. I would like to ask you if the ideas that Dr.

Shay is talking about now and mentioned in her feedback on your writing are new to you.

Sepideh: It was new, for example, in my first paper, I didn't get the point. Only after a lot of practice and many drafts I noticed I didn't argue anything in the first paper; [I] just repeated others' ideas.

(Conversation session with Sepideh and Professor Shay, August 2007)

Students' "respectful" approach to their sources could even unwittingly get them close to the stigmatizing charge of plagiarism. Out of too much respect for their sources, students may think it is quite legitimate to fully appropriate what they read, something that might manifest itself in the form of wholesale copying from sources. Ava had experienced this first hand, when she entered graduate school in London. She recalled:

When I started [graduate school] in England, for my first paper I simply copied whatever relevant information I found from here and there. I didn't know what writing was all about, but thankfully my professor was...well he was a very good man, very thoughtful, and... he basically just laughed at my paper and said: "sweetheart, this is not a paper by any definition. It's just a great work of plagiarism!" (laughs). He told me what writing a paper means is.... basically having an argument. You have to have a stance on something . . . you either agree or disagree with something someone else says... you write *your own* point of view, not simply repeat others' works. Of course this whole idea of you have to be in dialogue with others was new to me. My impression was that the closer I copy

their works, the richer and . . . the more accurate my paper will be. (Ava's interview, April 2007)

Sepideh had a similar experience when she submitted one of her term papers early on in her program. She recalled:

I gave my first paper and my teacher read it word by word. She gave me lots of comments. I got B-. But, for another course I did almost the same thing, I mean my approach was very similar, but my teacher was too upset with me since I didn't cite. She was so frustrated and she said: 'You know what if an undergraduate does this we will terminate him or her'. So, I was too upset and too disappointed at myself. (Sepideh's interview, April 2006)

The course professor had responded to Sepideh's paper in writing as follows:

I note that you use internet sources, such as "Rip Van Winkle: A Study of man without a history" (<http://www.smarrpublishers.com/Irvingessay.html>) but you fail to give proper credit to these sources and you fail to connect the information properly to your own words. You should avoid doing so in the future. (Professor's written feedback on Sepideh's paper for English Literature course)

While there are perhaps multiple reasons as to why students treat their sources uncritically and it is perhaps common to many novice academic writers (Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006; Abasi & Graves, 2008), it is plausible that the students in this study were generally too reverential toward their sources. At the very least, their previous literate experiences in their home country that involved little, if any, sustained writings

similar to those which are commonly required of undergraduate students in North American academia had a contributing role in their monologic approach to sources.

Reflections

The findings presented in this chapter highlight the experiences of L2 graduate student writers, whose perceptions and attitudes toward writing in North American academic institutions are too often underrepresented. Text-based interviews with Iranian graduate students and their professors suggest that there is a common perception of a cultural difference between the rhetorical styles in the writings of these students and the dominant practices in the context of their disciplines, which generally invoke essayist literacy criteria. I would like to argue that this perception of difference, along with the evident gap between the textual practices of L2 writers and their professors' expectations provide support for the validity, significance and viability of the body of knowledge that contrastive rhetoric represents.

The different textual practices that have emerged through conversations with student writers and faculty members, and the justifications or explanations associated with them were presented under some themes in this chapter. These categorizations are by no means meant to represent generalized assumptions about the nature of the Persian language as opposed to English, or define English texts produced by Iranian second language writers in a deterministic way. These, in other words, are not fixed categories but rather heuristic tools in the process of understanding and interpreting what writers and readers had to say about the texts. It is important to note that what I have presented in this chapter is a description of the shared perceptions and understandings of a small social group rather than a language or a culture. Having been through similar educational

experiences, sharing a language with certain historical processes at play in shaping its rhetorical structure, and being new to North America as well as North American graduate schools are some of the centripetal forces (Bakhtin, 1986) that have given coherence to the experiences of these individuals. At the same time, diverging forces such as the extent of exposure to the English language and academic writing as a genre, the desire to invest in becoming a member of the disciplinary community, and certain attitudes and practices that are not necessarily particular to learners from a certain background, but part and parcel of learning to write in another language, all make any static linguistic and cultural stereotyping based on the findings flawed.

Interviewing L2 English Speakers in Their L1

I knew all the student participants to some extent prior to inviting them to participate in this study. They were graduate students in the department where I studied, colleagues at my own workplace, or Iranian graduate students whom I had previously met on other occasions. The fact that we knew each other, spoke the same language and had similar educational experiences made them visibly comfortable and forthcoming in sharing their ideas and reflecting on their experiences. In her sketched agenda for a new generation of second language writing and literacy studies, Leki (2000) suggests that “one potentially fruitful but underrepresented type of study is in-depth interviews and observational investigations by researchers who speak the same language as the research participants” (p. 105). Interviewing participants from my own linguistic background led to extremely rich conversations that often took longer than I had expected at the participants’ own volition. Even during the course of the English interviews we had the opportunity to switch back to Persian whenever the participants had any difficulties

expressing their ideas in English. Conducting an interview in a second language might at times create challenges for the researcher in terms of the richness of interview data as second language speakers tend to resort to evasion strategies and minimal speech when they find themselves in speech situations they cannot handle. On this account, conducting the interviews in Persian was mutually preferred, and it in fact provided the participants with an opportunity to share their attitudes and perceptions without having to worry about their performance in a second language. Furthermore, perhaps because of the immediate relevance of the research topic to the everyday experiences of these student participants in graduate school, we were constantly engaged in dialogues related to my research even when we talked off record in other contexts. We had several phone conversations and email exchanges where the research issue would come up in one way or another. Thanks to the strong rapport and trust that by all appearances seemed to have developed between us, the participants often spoke openly and frankly about the new educational contexts they were operating within, and their relationships to others in this context. However, when it came to sharing their papers, the students were at times reluctant to provide me with certain texts on which they had received negative feedback or very low grades. I was explicitly told by some of these students on a few occasions that they were too embarrassed to share some of their papers. I therefore respected their wish to avoid causing them any psychological harm (Lee & Renzetti, 1993; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Silva, 1997).

As evidenced in many of the student/professor interactions presented in this chapter, the performance of student writers was at times evaluated unfavorably because of the different rhetorical style with which they approach writing tasks - or oral

presentations for that matter - in the context of their courses. One key question to be asked is what happens when these divergent understandings meet in a contact zone where the power relations are not equal, where students are expected to meet the requirements of the academic institution, and where a monologic rather than a dialogic approach dominates the interactions between faculty and students with regards to writing assignments and term papers. This question will be addressed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

A Critical Perspective on Response to Student Writing

Based on the underlying assumption that acts of writing are mediated through talk and interaction with, or response from the readers, another research question in the present study was concerned with how L2 student writers understood the responses that their texts elicited from their readers/evaluators, and to what extent they were they able to benefit from the feedback provided on their writings. The significance of this question lies in the fact that, as evidenced in earlier research and also in the previous chapter of this study, some international students have little exposure to academic writing in English prior to pursuing their graduate studies in North America. As a result, they may find it challenging to adapt to a wide range of social and academic situations and the privileged practices in their new educational environments (Belcher, 1994; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Braine, 2002; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Myles & Cheng, 2003). It remains to be seen if, and to what extent these students are able to take away from the comments and feedback provided on their writings what their professors hope they would. The focus of the original research question was accordingly on the process of constructing an acceptable argumentative text through interaction with professors and peer tutors, and the incorporation of feedback in future drafts of paper. However, through the course of the interviews with the students, it became apparent that their responses were predominantly culminating in a common theme of sharing experiences of being confused, over-stressed and frustrated as they tried to make sense of the written feedback provided on their papers. All the students stated that they had very few opportunities to talk about their texts with their professors, either during or at the end of the writing

process. This recurring theme, in fact, turned into an emerging focus (Eisner, 1998) in the study, as it seemed to be, in the words of Eisner, “a situation speak[ing] for itself” (p. 176) which was worth acknowledging and further exploring. As a result, I adopted a critical academic literacy perspective to understanding and interpreting the dominant practices around responding to students’ texts. Some of the issues that came to the fore included the high-stakes of writing activities for L2 graduate students, their initial encounter experiences in academic contact zones, and a critical analysis of the value of written feedback and some of its unintended consequences. In what follows these issues will be discussed in further detail.

Writing in Graduate School: What Is at Stake for International Students?

A cross-case analysis of the interview data revealed that the terms stress and anxiety (or their Persian equivalents), came up in literally all the interviews as students were reflecting on their academic experience in graduate school. The following extended quote from my interview with Nina, the 26-year old Master’s student of Education, shows how challenging she found the experience compared to her student life back at home, even towards the end of her graduate program:

توی ایران زندگی دانشجوییم خیلی عادیتتر بود. فکر کنم دانشجوی خیلی خوبی بودم. اعتماد به نفسم خیلی زیاد بود. یعنی خوبم درس میخوندم ها؛ ولی از وقتی که میذاشتم حسابی نتیجه میگرفتم. ولی حالا به احساسای مسخره‌ای میاد سراغم که هیچوقت قبلا تجربه نکرده بودم. مثلاً به دفه وسط کلاس دلم برای خونه تنگ میشه؛ میرم تو به عالم دیگه‌ای به جای اینکه تمرکز کنم. یا مثلاً وقتی میخوام به چیز پیچیده‌ای رو بگم جمله‌هام باهم نمیان

. . . اینقدر بچگونه و ساده و کوتاه حرف میزنم که میگم بهتره هیچی نگم. بعدشم به خاطر همه اینا فکر کنم خیلی به قول معروف مودی شدم. خیلی استرس دارم. دوست ندارم برم بیرون با بچه‌ها وقتی میرن کافی و چت بعد از کلاس چون اصلا نمیدونم چی باید بگم. حالا الان مخصوصا به ذره بهتر شده بعضی وقتا به خودم میگم خوبه کلی پیشرفت کردم زبانم بهتر شده، کلی چیز یادگرفتم. نباید زیاد به خودم سخت بگیرم. ولی بعضی وقتام میگم من اینجا چیکار میکنم؟ تصمیم درستی گرفتم؟ وقتی فکرشو میکنی خیلی سخته. رو پرفرمنسم اثر میذاره. من پروژه و پیپر و پرزنتیشن و اینا قبلا اصلا برام کاری نداشت، ولی الان اینا شدن کابوسم!

Back in Iran I was living the life of a regular student. I can say I was a very good student. I was very confident, I mean, I worked hard and I really benefited from the time I put into my work. Now I have all these silly feelings I'd never experienced before, like feeling homesick right in the middle of a class, daydreaming instead of concentrating, child-like short sentences coming out of my mouth instead of sophisticated ones to express myself, and then... being terribly moody as a result of all this. I'm stressed out ... I don't feel like joining others when they go out for a coffee and chat after class because I don't know what to say. I sometimes feel like I'm doing O.K. and this is natural and maybe I'm too hard on myself, but at other times ask myself 'what am I doing here?' and 'should I really be doing this?' It's overwhelming when you think about it, and it shows in your performance. The presentations and the papers... they were never a big deal for me but now they've turned into my nightmare! (Nina's interview, May 2005)

The excerpt above suggests that Nina was very cognizant of the limited linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991) at her disposal to express her ideas in English compared to her first language. The disparity between her level of sophistication and language she had to express herself partly contributed to her frustration. One of the participating doctoral students brought up a similar concern, reflecting on the stress associated with participating in class discussions and making oral presentations:

از حرف زدن تو کلاس میترسم چون میدونم کلی اشتباه دارم. وقتی تو کلاس حرف میزنی انگار تمام مشکلات زبانتو جلوی همکلاسیات به نمایش میذاری. من خیلی وقتا جواب یه سوالایی رو که مطرح میشه دارم، ولی هیچی نمیگم. یادمه که یه بار تو کلاس یه چیزی به ذهنم رسید که به نظر خودم خیلی جالب بود، به بحث کلاس مربوط بود و دوست داشتم بگم به بقیه. کلی با خودم کلنجار رفتم ولی آخرش وقتی جراتشو پیدا کردم که دهنمو واکنم دیگه موضوع بحث عوض شده بود، داشتن یه چیز دیگه ای میگفتن.

I'm afraid of speaking in class because I know I will make lots of mistakes. Talking in front of your classmates is like exposing all your language problems. Sometimes I have the answers to the questions posed in class, but I don't say anything. I remember once I came up with an idea that I thought was interesting and wanted to share it with the group, but by the time I gathered enough courage to open my mouth, they had moved on to a different topic. (Ava's interview, April 2007)

Interestingly, the participants spoke of academic writing as a means of resolving the immediate pressure they felt through class discussions and oral presentations. Amir,

for instance, viewed academic writing as a means to compensate for his lack of participation in group discussions. For him, writing assignments and term papers were, in fact, “the only opportunity to express yourself; the only way that you can show your professors you have something to say and you have studied.” (Amir’s interview, May 2005). He pointed out that even though this raised the stakes for him in the papers that he submitted to his professors, writing was still a less stressful activity while he was actually engaged in it:

چونکه من . . . اعتراف میکنم که زیاد تو کارای کلاسی شرکت نمیکنم ،
 واسه همین پیپری که مینویسم تنها چیزیه که استادم از روش میتونه قضاوت
 کنه که کارم چطوره یا بهم نمره بده . اینه که خیلی مهمه . ولی خوب
 عوضش وقتی مینویسم فرصت فکر کردن دارم، برمیگردم تغییر میدم
 نوشتمو، میدم دوستم بخونه واسم چک کنه. یه خورده راحتتره.

Because I . . . I admit that I don’t have much active participation in class, so my paper is the only thing my professor has for judging my performance and giving me a grade for the course, so it’s very important. But then, at least when I am writing I have time to think and go back, I give it to my friend to read and check it for me. This makes it a bit easier. (Amir’s interview, May 2005)

The two Master’s students participating in the present study both intended to go back to Iran upon the completion of their degree requirements and, for this reason, did not feel it was important to invest in academic writing much beyond overcoming the temporary obstacle of passing their courses and meeting the requirements of their degree

programs. They both agreed that extensive academic writing in English was unlikely to have a significant role in their future professions. On the other hand, for the three doctoral students, in addition to the professors' judgments and grades, the role of writing in moving toward the goal of becoming professional members of the academic community was clear. One major concern expressed by these students was whether their English would improve to the point that they would be able to write a dissertation, and publish their scholarly work in refereed journals, an increasingly important requirement for securing academic positions. In any case, the stakes of writing were very high for all graduate students, albeit for different reasons.

Professors' Response: Accommodating and Re-considering Expectations

The same language issues that led to the students' reluctance to participate in oral academic activities seemed to pose a problem for disciplinary professors when it came to the evaluation and grading of student papers. One of the participating professors reflected on the challenge associated with exercising fair practice and setting expectations for her ESL Master's students:

I remember when I first started teaching in the M.Ed. program here, I went to a couple of other professors, because I was just desperate . . . I said how am I supposed to evaluate this paper because the English is so poor and am I supposed to pass this person? Nobody had an answer for me; it was basically "Use your own discretion", and I found that very, very difficult because I had a lot of empathy for the student but the work was not up to the standard that I would consider acceptable for a Master's paper, and therefore I had to lower the bar because of

language problems. In the case of one particular student I was convinced that she did not have the TOEFL score they're required to have to be admitted, but to my surprise I found out that she actually had a fairly good TOEFL score and so I began to question the meaning of that as a passport to graduate courses. (Professor Watson's interview, June 2005)

Fishman and McCarthy (2002) have raised a similar issue in their account of the dilemma that one of the authors faces when evaluating a paper written by an ESL student taking his philosophy course. The paper is described as one which "deserved low grades because it reflected not only poor command of standard English, but limited understanding of the assigned philosophical texts also" (p. 195). At the same time, the professor expresses his awareness of the fact that the starting point was not the same for this student as others, which could justify a more "lenient or atypical evaluation". In similar situations, many disciplinary professors tend to demonstrate an accommodating attitude and a very well-informed educational response. Professor Watson, for instance, went on to describe her understanding of the unusually difficult circumstances for international graduate students as follows:

These kids mostly come to grad school with a very different life experience. I mean it's very different from someone who was born here, lives a mile away from campus, and is in the program because his cousin mentioned it in a cocktail party, so he thought "Why not?" Some of the ESL students are here from halfway across the world. They're on scholarships from Beijing or Tehran or anywhere, and unless they succeed, they go home and it's

not good. I mean how huge could that kind of pressure be?
(Professor Watson's interview, June 2005)

It has to be acknowledged that while content area professors have every intention to assist their students in becoming members of their respective disciplinary communities through reading, writing and engaging in scholarly conversations, they mostly do not have backgrounds in composition studies or second language writing instruction, and cannot be expected to be familiar with issues around second language pedagogy. Besides, research has shown that some faculty are less sympathetic and less willing to overlook language issues in written coursework of graduate students, particularly at the doctoral level (Leki, 2006). In addressing students' immediate and long-term disciplinary writing needs, it cannot be taken for granted that, by virtue of being thoughtful and informed educators, all professors would naturally re-evaluate their expectations and find appropriate ways to accommodate their graduate L2 students, or know exactly how and which aspects of student writing to attend to in a multicultural setting (Ferris, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008). Through critically examining some of the course documents and listening to what students have to say about the response their writing activities generate, it becomes apparent that some forms of feedback might be misunderstood and some institutional practices might have unintended consequences for the educational experience of second language writers. Among these are assuming that brief descriptions of writing assignments in course outlines or writing evaluation sheets can be clearly understood, relying merely on written feedback in responding to student writing, and hoping that referring students to writing centers can resolve their writing problem.

Understanding the Writing Requirements: The Academic Practice of Mystery

There is a prevailing view that documents such as course outlines, writing guidelines and evaluation sheets that professors normally provide their students with at the beginning of their courses serve the purpose of clearly laying out the expectations and course requirements. The assumption here is that the criteria that students are expected to meet are spelled out in such documents in terms that should be part of every student's common knowledge, and that students can easily consult those as guidelines should they have any questions about their term papers or other coursework. However, the interview data from this study suggests that some graduate L2 student writers at times have little sense of the exact meaning of the criteria referenced in these documents, even after spending a long time attempting to sort out their meanings, or asking their peers for further clarification on the concepts. A case in point is the following excerpt from the course outline of an English Literature course that Ava, the comparative literature doctoral student shared with me. The paragraph provides some tips on how to write the first of a set of five in-class book review assignments that students were expected to complete throughout the course:

“Some things to remember: Generate this first, in-class assignment in ‘essay’ form (300- 400 words) after the initial brainstorming session. Make sure you have a strong and relevant title, a clear thesis statement, adequate evidence for position, and an organizational structure a reader can follow with ease.” (Course outline, Literature Course, p. 3, boldface original)

The course outline also contained guidelines about the final term paper, among other course requirements. Ava said that she and other students did not receive any feedback on their writings throughout the class. At the end of the course, Ava and others had received a package in the mail from their professor with the following cover letter:

Table 6. *Instructor's cover letter with students' papers in the mail*

Dear students:

Enclosed are your writing assignments and final paper. Grades were posted today.

Regards,
xxxxxxx

Ava had received a series of B marks on all of her 1-2 page in-class review assignments and a C on her 17 page final paper. It was evident from the professor's written comments that two constant problems for Ava in nearly all her papers were constructing a clear thesis statement, and developing an acceptable argument. The professor had demonstrated his lack of satisfaction with Ava's performance on these fronts in the form of marginal notes next to the first paragraph of the short papers that read "Where is your thesis statement?", and also the following written comment at the end of her final paper:

Ava, you show a familiarity with Wollstonecraft's work, but your paper reads more like a summary of her position. The paper does not follow a clearly stated thesis, and you never develop a specific argumentative focus: what points are you making? What insights are you providing your readers [with] about this text or this author? Please go back

to course outline for more info re the evaluation scheme.
 (Professor's comments on Ava's final paper for a Literature
 Course, underline original)

What Ava had to say about the above comments revealed that for her, following the instructions in course documents and writing guidelines was not a straightforward matter:

I thought I had a clear thesis statement, but apparently I didn't. I had really paid close attention to writing a good one at the beginning of my paper. I followed the instructions for that assignment. At least that's what I thought I was doing. I never got a chance to ask how it was supposed to be written because there was no time. The professor returned all the assignments at the beginning of next semester in mail, and I never got a chance to ask him my questions. I would really like to know what was wrong with my thesis statements. I think that's a problem. They say your grade is this because these were missing from your paper, but it's tricky because I don't know what to do in future, how to change it. (Ava's interview, April 2007)

The fact that students have questions and find ambiguities surrounding what they are exactly expected to do is not surprising. This obviously has to do with the fact that there are certain conventions in the academic institutions and disciplinary areas that these students have recently joined, and it takes time for them to gain access to, or learn these conventions. In fact, the whole purpose of having writing activity as the central action in higher education is arguably to prepare the students to approximate the ideals of the dominant literacy practices in the academic and professional circles (Lea & Street, 1999; Womack, 1993). However, what has been referred to in the literature as the "institutional

practice of mystery” (Lillis, 2001) enhances the confusion for new graduate students from non-mainstream backgrounds, including international ESL students in the process. Assuming that concepts such as thesis statement, coherence, voice, developing an argument and taking a critical stance, all of which are criteria associated with essayist literacy (Farr, 1993; Trimbur, 1990), are transparent and meaningful to all the participants in institutions of higher education can work against those who have not been initiated into this dominant literacy practice in their prior educational experiences. Ava told me that she spent a long time asking her fellow students to go over the course outline with her in order to get a better sense of the requirements. She believed she had worked hard, yet she had ended up with negative feedback and a low grade on her written coursework because of her lack of familiarity with certain concepts that “other students were comfortable with” (Ava’s interview, April 2007).

In the new social and cultural contexts, students like Ava are likely to find out that certain discourses, literacy practices and subject positions that are advocated and privileged are different from those they bring or those they can imagine. Farr (1993) draws the attention of educators to the issue of exclusionary practices in the form of a negative evaluation of the oral and written performances of “those whose discourse is different” (p. 6) in asymmetrical situations. For a graduate L2 writer, who despite what is normally expected from mainstream graduate students, has not been initiated into the conventions of essayist literacy in her past educational experience, the practice of mystery does not facilitate gaining access to the privileged discourse, but simply adds to the sense of being an outsider. More collaborative approaches to student writing which can alleviate the ambiguities around good academic writing will be further discussed.

Paper Margins: Semiotic Spaces for Interaction

Graduate papers are rarely returned to students with only a grade. More often than not, the narrow margins of student papers, and even the narrower spaces between the lines provide a large arena for complex interactions between student writers and their professors or peer tutors. This mechanism, generally known as written feedback, is believed to be an essential component in the learning cycle, creating an opportunity for engagement, reflection and improved future performance (Weaver, 2006).

Conventionally, written feedback has been “the most widely practiced and the most traditional form of response” to student writing (Straub & Lunsford, 1995, p. 1). Upon a closer examination, the term “feedback” seems to have mechanistic overtones: it originates from control theory, a branch of engineering that deals with the behavior of systems, and refers to the return of a part of the output of a machine, system, or process to the original input. This seems to be a fair description of the sometimes unidirectional, non-interactive and shorthand notes provided on a single draft of a student’s papers.

Unless supplemented by at least one other form of response such as oral conferences, dialogue journals, or following up on the incorporation of recommended changes in future drafts, written feedback has been criticized by some writing researchers as the least effective pedagogical practice in responding to students’ texts (Ferris, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Straub, 1999). Table 7 lists some instances of directive comments and questions on the margins of the student papers written by the professor participants in this study. These are clearly meant to draw the writers’ attention to the weaknesses of their papers and improve their future performances, but from the perspective of students more often than not they are difficult to interpret, demoralizing and in short, not very effective

Table 7. *Sample of directive comments and questions on students' papers*

Expand.	What?
Elaborate.	Link to <u>Lit</u> ?
Explain.	<u>Source</u> ?
Introduce this idea more properly.	<u>Thesis statement</u> ?
Unnecessary!	<u>Relevance</u> ?
<u>Redundant.</u>	Huh?
Eliminate this.	What is this doing here?
Move this paragraph from here to . . . <u>here</u> [marked with arrows]	How?
Better transition needed.	Is this your opinion?
This is unclear.	How is <u>this</u> a paragraph?
Each deserves a separate paragraph.	???
This paragraph is not coherent.	And?
Avoid passive voice.	!
Too general!	How does this tie in with the rest of the ideas here?
Careful! This is too strong an assertion.	
<u>Awkward structure.</u>	

15 June 2006

Modernism in American Literature

Modernism was a conscious break with traditional forms and techniques of expression.

The Movement which began at the late 19th century was a response to the shift of thought and

belief participated by Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. Darwin's

Origin of the Species (1859) challenged the traditional view of man made "in the image of

God" by the idea that man is the descendent of the ape. Nietzsche's declaration about the "death

of God” withered the tradition of religion. Freud’s idea about psychology elevated the individual

and the inner-being over the social human being and preferred unconscious to the self-conscious

(Holman 205). Modernist writers had a tendency to turn to the inner self. As the critic Denis

Donoghue has expressed it: "Modernism is concerned with the validity of one's feelings and the

practice of converting external images into inward, personal energy" (75). Modernism is a sense

of alienation and despair; as Ernest Hemingway in his novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) portrayed

the aimlessness of the "lost generation" of American expatriates in Europe during the postwar

period. Scott Fitzgerald view of his age is perhaps more sound than Hemingway. The picture of

age that he portrayed is illusions and false hopes. Modern novels are dealing with the theme of

the alienation and illusions. Modern poetry, in addition to dealing with the same themes of the

modern novel, makes use of a natural rhyme and spare style to express personal feelings. Frost's

poems were considered too close to the plain talk. Frost seemed to capture the unique patterns of

the common speech and tone in his poetry. Sylvia Plath is a Confessional poet who wrote

[You need to provide a better transition to these writers.]

It has to be noted that positive comments and acknowledgments of the students' efforts also comprise an important part of written feedback on paper margins. Short confirmations of being on the right track in the form of tick marks, or comments such as "good point", "interesting observation", "I agree", etc., as well as encouraging comments or suggestions for building up on the topic in future papers provide the professors with an opportunity to approve of their students' performance and also communicate to them that the paper has been closely read. However, in the case of the five participants in this research project, positive comments were scarce, as their performances were clearly less than satisfactory compared to the expectations of their professors.

Given the widespread use of written feedback on paper margins to interact with students, it can be argued that this response mechanism provides a critical site for interaction between professors and students, or in Lotman's terms (Lotman, 1988, 1990/2001) a semiosphere. In the types of interaction within this site which were just described, two main kinds of signals can be observed, being transmitted from professors to students: one of acceptance, or a modality of "high affinity", and one of challenge, or a modality of "low affinity" (Hodge & Kress, 1988), signaling lack of acceptance of the texts produced by new participants due to little compliance with the groups' generic conventions. With the unequal power/knowledge relation between professors and students at play in such interactions, I would like to argue that the directive written feedback on student papers can be an instance of the "monologic function", which in Lotman's account is one of the dual functions of texts in any sociocultural setting. In a monologic treatment, certain texts are elevated to the status of standard, participants are encouraged to comply with their structure, and their performance is evaluated in terms of

consistency with these socially upheld patterns of textual performance (Lotman, 1988, 1990/2001; Wertsch, 1991). In contrast, in a dialogic function, texts are understood as sites for interaction and interanimation (Bakhtin, 1986) between the participants in sociocultural settings. Knowledge of the semiotic codes or the social languages comes about through the process of generating meaning and actively participating in group communications. Significantly, the differences between the language of the “sender” and the “receiver” (i.e. the reader and the writer) can be understood as differences in “ways of meaning” (Bakhtin, 1986) rather than imperfections, as they are “the very essence of a text’s function as a ‘thinking device’” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 74). Drawing on the research of Carol Gilligan (1982), Wertsch highlights the importance of Lotman’s distinction between these two functions of texts. I see parallels between the Wertsch’s analysis, and the issue of responding to second language writers’ texts in English academic settings. Wertsch (1991) states:

The importance of Lotman’s distinction between the univocal and dialogic functions of texts can be seen in its relevance to several ongoing debates in the social sciences. . . . In her book, appropriately entitled *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan explores ways in which psychological theory has failed to take into account women’s perspectives, or what Bakhtin might have called women’s social languages. The result, according to Gilligan, is that women’s responses in therapy and interview sessions are often assessed on criteria developed for males. In at least some cases, this has meant that basic assumptions underlying women’s responses have not been recognized and that their answers have therefore been ranked as less developed than men’s. (p. 76).

I believe that the basic assumption that second language writers' rhetorical styles often deviate from the conventions of essayist literacy, and that these students would be more likely to succeed if the genres of power were made visible and accessible to them is monologic in outlook and can be ideologically questionable, no matter how well intentioned (Belcher, 2006; Benesch, 2001). Moreover, evaluating students' texts based on the degree of compliance with the dominant academic genres buys into the value and the prestige assigned to these ways of writing, while students' own rhetorical styles are too often discredited as diverging from acceptability criteria and "failed attempts to approximate prestigious forms" (Hyland, 2002, p.125). On the other hand, adopting a dialogic approach to students' texts, particularly at the early stages, would provide an opportunity to validate the literacy practices they bring into acts of writing and reduces their feeling of loss of social status in an unfamiliar sociocultural context while they are actively engaged in learning the new genre through participating in the scholarly activities of their disciplinary communities.

This being said, it is important to remember that the univocal and dialogic functions of text are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are in a kind of "dynamic tension" within the semiosphere (Lotman, 1988). The key question is the consequences of the predominance of one over the other. In the academic context of writing, for instance, the result of the dominance of the univocal approach could be creating undue stress and anxiety for international students new to the graduate school and sending them the unintended message that their literacy practices, hence their authorial identities (Ivanič, 1998) are not validated. More importantly, this sense could even impact a students'

decision to drop out of a graduate program, as exemplified in the following experience of one participant in this study.

Response to Writing: An Initial Encounter Experiences

One of the pressing concerns for Marjan, the 30-year old doctoral student of Second Language Acquisition, was to quickly adjust both to her new life in North America and to the academic expectations of her doctoral program, literally on the first day of arriving in the U.S. from Iran. Obviously, many international students experience the challenges associated with an initial transition period, but for Marjan the situation was more intense given that due to some visa problems, she had arrived in the U.S. almost ten days into the academic session for which she was registered. Working in the Persian language department as a graduate assistant, keeping up with the heavy reading load of her courses, and more importantly dealing with the stress of several oral presentations and writing assignments left her with very little time to socialize and learn about her new environment. She had immediately noticed that in spite of her relatively good English language proficiency score and basic knowledge of academic writing, she had problems in meeting the writing requirements of her courses. As described in the previous chapter, she heavily relied on the assistance of a bilingual colleague, who was also a writing tutor. Towards the end of the first semester it was obvious that Marjan was struggling with writing. She had requested extensions for some of her term papers, and began the next term with “incomplete” grades for those courses. Early in the following academic session, I found Marjan very excited about a course for which she was supposed to design a study on one aspect of second language acquisition. She had decided to propose a project to be conducted in Iran, in cooperation with one of her former classmates who

was a high-school English teacher. Throughout the academic session, she told me about the long hours of phone conversations and emails that she and her friend exchanged about the project. Marjan worked on several drafts of her study design paper. Towards the end of the term, she shared with me five drafts of the same paper, each full of editorial notes and recommendations on choice of words, grammatical structure and organization from Nadia, her writing tutor. Marjan had reported on her project a few times in class, and had received positive feedback from both her research group and her professor. She finally felt confident enough to write the last draft of the report on her own. She vividly took pride in her accomplishment.

Shortly after submitting her final paper, she came to my office one day. She was very upset, and told me she was totally convinced that the doctoral program was not for her. She said she had received her paper back from her professor, who had rejected it and had asked for a complete re-write. She said she had not slept the night before, and now she was seriously considering quitting the Ph.D. program. Marjan did not want to share the paper as in her own words, she was “too embarrassed”. I told her that I totally understood, and she did not need to worry about it. However, the next day she walked back into my office with the paper in her hand, saying that she believed it was important to bring this into the picture in talking about her experience with academic writing. Here is a note from the professor on the margin of the first page of Marjan’s 15 page study design:

This is a very poor paper. First you need to have your work proof-read. Graduate papers should not contain language errors. Second, you have not developed a good motivation for your study from the previous work. Third, you have no

content to the elements of your study. You have written the template, but you have not inserted anything into it. Thus, there is no way to judge whether the study might be promising. (Professor's written feedback on Marjan's SLA paper)

The response from the professor to Marjan's writing on the margin of her paper turned out to be an encounter experience (Pratt, 1991) that she was totally unprepared for. Marjan's description of her immediate emotional reaction to the feedback was "as if someone had slapped me in the face", particularly since she believed that whenever she had talked about the project in the class, it was received positively, leaving her with the impression that she was on the right track.

Marjan finally switched to an MA program in her department after several email exchanges and meetings with her academic advisor. She believed this would leave her with more time to work on her English language and writing skills, and at the same time explore her new environment.

Resorting to first language as a safe house. Marjan was thrilled about the prospects of being able to take one of the two independent study courses in the Master's program at the Persian department. The course was offered in Persian, and she could write the final term paper in Persian if she wanted to. In line with Pratt's conception, I would consider this course a safe house she was resorting to in the face of her previous stressful experience in the academic contact zone. Myles and Cheng (2003) suggest that everyone appreciates the importance of safe houses as opportunities for establishing strong relationships with other people from a common cultural background. The function of safe houses can be raising the self-esteem of international students and positively

influencing their personal adjustment in a new environment. Marjan received very encouraging comments and extremely positive feedback from her professor on her Persian writings. The following excerpt is translated from the Persian note at the end of one of her writing assignments, as a case in point:

مرجان، شما با نوشتن هر مقاله توقع مرا از خودت بالاتر میبری. نوشته شما ویژگیهای بارز زیادی دارد. . . دقت نظری که در تحلیل واژگان، دستور و ساختار شعر داشته‌اید تحسین برانگیز است. در بعضی موارد اندکی شتابزدگی یا غفلت میبینم که بدون شک معلول ضرورت اختصار است و درباره آنها میتوانیم به بحث بنشینیم. بسیار عالی است! آفرین!

Marjan, with writing each piece you raise my expectations. Your text has many distinguishing features including an admirable scrutiny in your analysis of words, structures and constructs in this poem. In a few cases I noted you've missed some points which I'm sure is due to time and space limitations. We can sit down and discuss these sometime. Well done! Congratulations!

Reflecting on her Persian writing experience, Marjan stated:

I sometimes have a hard time forcing myself to write in English because that's not me. I feel much more comfortable writing my paper in Persian. The ideas may not be very different, but the way I say them is. (Email correspondence, March 2008)

Some other safe houses for Marjan included her active participation in the Iranian graduate students' foundation at her university, hosting a radio show in a local Persian

podcast radio, asking for assistance with her writing assignments from an American colleague who was also a writing tutor and fluent in Persian. Other participants in this study, including Amir and Nina, the two Master's students also mentioned that they felt much more confident when they were engaged in group projects, or when they were talking about the writing assignments to their peers rather than their professors. While these safe houses have been referred to as valuable sources at the disposal of minorities and non-mainstream groups, their potential downside can be separating these individuals from the broader context with which they need to interact.

Re-thinking Response to Student Writing in Higher Education: Alternative Practices

When it comes to written feedback, the data from this study seems to point at a gap between the professors' and students' interpretation of the assessment task. This was evidenced in the student interviews, when some of the participants mentioned that they were surprised to find a good mark or a positive note at the end of a paper full of corrective feedback and marginal notes. They took this to mean that professor has ascribed the mark out of sympathy and with a lot of compromise. This can be interpreted in light of the different functions of feedback in different educational contexts (Bell, 1993). While teachers see praise as a means of encouragement and recognition of effort, for students praises and good marks are a way of recognizing achievement, which they sometimes see at odds with the feedback provided throughout the paper. This, among many other reasons discussed above can render written feedback per se as not very effective. At least one participant in this study stated that she tended to ignore feedback when it was difficult to understand.

Based on the data from the student interviews and the textual analysis, I would argue for the importance of talking around multiple drafts of a text in progress rather than merely giving written feedback on the final draft of student papers in general, and second language writers in particular. The considerable advantages of immediacy, negotiation, and opportunity for clarification that the talk-around-the-text approach provides are simply not part of the picture in written feedback on student paper margin.

In addition to written feedback, writing conferences, and peer group reviews, recent advances in technology have opened up other platforms for communication about writing between students and faculty. These include web-based course-management systems such as blackboard, which give readers the opportunity to comment on texts through voice recordings, inserting written comments on digital files and tracing changes in following drafts, or simply using emails to comment on student texts. Because all these mechanisms are currently available and many more will be in future, and because there are reasonable arguments for the use and applicability of each in different contexts, it is unlikely that faculty members universally opt for one method over the others, but at the same time it is important that they consider various options at their disposal.

Reflections

In their study of the perceptions of difficulties in postgraduate thesis writing from the perspective of L2 students and their supervisors, Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) state that the participating graduate students express uncertainty as to what to include in the results and discussion section of their theses and how to organize this section towards the end of their masters program, after having worked closely on several drafts of their

texts. The researchers are surprised to hear this “given the amount of time and feedback the students had received from their supervisors” (p.13). They go on to recommend that “future research investigates why such a situation can arise so late in the supervision process” (p. 13). I do not find the results of their research surprising by any means, in light of the issues around feedback addressed in this chapter. From an academic literacies perspective, enculturation and socialization into acceptable practices is not a linear process and certainly not just a matter of time. Contrary to what is generally assumed in studies of learning in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), the second language writer participants in the present study did not merely act as apprentices gradually moving towards full membership in their academic communities. For them learning to write did not seem to be an unproblematic process of socialization and enculturation into the preferred practices. Rather, the process was indeed complicated by many factors including the students’ previous literacy practices, their past and present multiple allegiances to other communities of practice, their encounter experiences in academic contact zones, and the potential safe houses they had at their disposal.

The aim of critically analyzing the response to student writing practices presented in this chapter is certainly not to promote the view that every text produced by students should be accepted as an attempt at academic writing, or that no common grounds or commonly accepted textual practices in disciplinary communities should be promoted. It is rather consciousness-raising or what Ivanič and Weldon (1999) refer to as “critical language awareness” on the part of both students and faculty as to the heterogeneity and diversity in textual practices, and getting both parties to appreciate the process of “disciplinary apprenticeship” (Candlin & Plum, 1999) that students need to go through.

Professors are certainly there to help their students in this socialization process, which can be vague and confusing at times. However, their attempts to familiarize non-mainstream students with the rules of the game, and to initiate them into the rhetorical ways of meaning in their newly adopted discourse communities can have unintended consequences at times. While there is a need to familiarize ESL students both implicitly and explicitly with the institutionalized discourses and appropriate ways of using them, a univocal penalizing approach to their writing styles and textual practices can undermine meaningful communication, and more importantly, the ideology of multiculturalism and diversity in academic institutions.

Understandably, scheduling appointments to listen to the students' writing ideas at various points in the writing process and responding to their various drafts in conversation sessions is not feasible for professors given their time constraints. However, making a point of doing this with international graduate students and encouraging them to identify exactly what aspects of writing they would like to receive feedback on can provide these students with a much needed positive educational experience. Faculty and students can also benefit from a closer collaboration between the disciplinary units and the writing centers. Some practical recommendations in this direction will be presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Final Thoughts and Implications

With the trend toward a fast growing international student enrollment in graduate programs in universities across Canada and the United States, the face of higher education in North America is changing. International ESL students encounter the challenges of adapting to a new society, language, culture, and often within a short period of time, the literacy practices of academic institutions where they are expected to engage in disciplinary reading and writing activates. For this reason, understanding the nature of writing in a second language and what is at stake for these second language writers in socioacademic contexts is becoming increasingly important.

Looking back at my personal experience as a second language writer who started a doctoral program shortly after arriving in Canada from Iran, I have to admit that I consider my experience to be one of success at this point in my academic life: I was not required to take any remedial academic writing classes before starting my credit content area courses. I actively participated in and satisfactorily completed the reading and writing requirements of my courses, and received tremendous support, encouraging comments and positive feedback from my professors all along. I remember that at some point I was uncertain if all the positive feedback was because I was exceeding the expectations of the professors from a second language writer, or if they were judging my performance on par with an English speaking doctoral student. I felt more confident when one of my professors suggested that I submit a term paper for publication in a peer reviewed journal. Early on in the program, when some professors were encouraging those of us who were neophyte researchers to try presenting at low-key student conferences to

gain experience, I felt confident enough to present that term paper at a major international conference in my field of study. While I, like many other second language writers in English speaking institutions of higher education, have satisfactorily completed the requirements of my program until this point and also ventured into publishing in scholarly journals, some other ESL students do not fare so well in their graduate school experience. It is easy to dismiss the failure of those who do not succeed based on factors such as low English proficiency level, inadequate preparation, lack of motivation and negative attitude. However, many of these students, such as those who participated in the present study, are highly motivated and diligent learners, who also happen to have acceptable proficiency scores. In fact, some of them are very fluent in English when they enter graduate school but still do not succeed in meeting the requirements of academic writing in their courses. What, then, would account for the lack of success in the disciplinary writing activities of these students, and what impact would their stalled efforts have on their prospective academic lives?

In this dissertation, I made a case for the validity, significance and applicability of the body of knowledge that contrastive rhetoric represents in shedding light on some of the above questions in second language writing research. Through bringing to fore the perceived cultural differences in the rhetorical styles of writing between Persian and English from the perspective of the participating Iranian graduate students and their professors, the study served two purposes at the interrelated levels of theory and practice.

At a theoretical level, and in response to a call in the field of intercultural rhetoric for new approaches to cultural studies of writing (Connor, 2008), this study has addressed some of the current criticisms against contrastive rhetoric through drawing on a dynamic

view of cultures of writing rather than a static definition of any particular culture. The goal was arguing for the relevance of culture in writing studies, while moving beyond the “colonial construction of cultural dichotomies” (Kubota & Lehner, 2004, p.7) which have long been recurring in mainstream contrastive rhetoric. This was accomplished through adopting an interdisciplinary approach to a rhetorical study of writing that applied principles of a social theory of language (Bakhtin, 1986), a situated literacies perspective of academic writing in higher education (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Lea & Street, 1999), and a view of reasoning and argumentation as a socio-historic epistemological construct (Lotman, 1990/2001; Toulmin, 1964/2003; Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1984). The study revealed certain differences between the textual practices that the participating graduate students brought into acts of writing and the way they were expected to write in academic contexts where the conventions of essayist literacy were dominant. Text-based interviews with the participants provided evidence for the existing gap between the students’ practices and the generic requirements of the argumentative papers assigned to them. Among these differences were approaches to the organization of information, clear statement of a thesis in an argumentative paper, logical transition between ideas, staying on a topic as opposed to digression, valuing redundancy and flowery language as measures of elegance contrary to the expectation to avoid them in academic writing, and relying too closely on source materials as opposed to bringing in an authorial voice in the text. While it can be argued that problems of this kind at times exist in the writings of first language English students as well, and academic writing is in a sense nobody’s first language, the intercultural rhetoric perspective offered in this study viewed the textual decisions and rhetorical performances of writers in light of the history in which their texts

were immersed (Lotman, 1990/ 2001). The study provided an account of how the attitudes and perceptions of the participating Iranian students could be shaped, at least partially, by the historically valued poetic and persuasive quality of the Persian language. In addition, at least one of the students, whose term papers were poorly evaluated and even rejected by her disciplinary professors, was an achieved writer in her first language, and received very positive feedback on the Persian papers that she submitted for a Directed Study course offered in Persian in her department. This, I believe, speaks to the fact that the problems with writing in a second language are not necessarily rooted in being novice writers regardless of the linguistic background, but can be associated with the literate practices in different historically situated social, educational and institutional contexts.

At the level of practice, the study next explored the way these differences impacted the students' educational experience in graduate school here in North America. The professors adopted accommodating practices such as revisiting their early expectations of international graduate students, extending submission deadlines for term papers in light of the problems that these students were experiencing with writing, and involving them in group projects with other peers. Such practices were identified by students as being helpful in reducing their stress and anxiety. Meanwhile, a critical analysis of some of the written responses that the writings of these students had elicited provided an account of how a monologic approach to conflicting textual conventions would place second language writers at a disadvantage particularly during the early stages of their academic experience. In this study I conceived of the feedback provided on the paper margins as a semiotic site with particular spatial and temporal dimensions

that typically rendered it monologic. More often than not, making sense of the coded language of the feedback and the hard to decipher handwriting, along with addressing all the comments on the grammatical, lexical and rhetorical problems, turned out to be a frustrating experience for the student writers. They described written feedback as a less than effective way of responding to their texts, in spite of the professors' intention to use it as an opportunity to engage the students in reflecting on the text and improving their future performance. I invoked Pratt's (1991) notion of encounter in the contact zone to depict the experiences of some L2 graduate student writers as their early writings were received with negative written feedback without an opportunity for one-on-one writing conferences to elaborate on the feedback or to listen to what they had to say about the choices they had made. The students did not reach out to their professors to ask for such opportunities for several reasons. However, they were not passive in the face of such challenging encounter experiences either. They tried to develop creative alternatives and strategies for learning the rules of the game in their academic communities (Casanave, 2002). For instance, they reached out to their peers to ask for clarifications on course requirements and to talk around their texts in less stressful situations where the power dynamics were more symmetrical compared to professor-student interactions. They openly shared their concerns with other more-experienced second language peers in their disciplinary communities, and asked for their advice on meeting professors' expectations in addition to seeking help from academic writing centers. Besides, whenever possible, they resorted to safe houses such as courses offered in their first language, or student organizations from their own linguistic communities where they could gain confidence through actively participating in more balanced and dialogic interactions in their first

language. The pedagogical practices which gauged students' success in acts of writing based on the proximity of their performance to certain conventions, and treated the dominant writing conventions as if they were transparently meaningful were clearly ineffective in responding to the disciplinary writing of these second language graduate students. More importantly, at least in the case of one participant in this study, such practices were part of the picture in the student's sense of failure and her subsequent decision to drop out of a doctoral program.

Implications for Practice

In light of the findings of the study, one key issue would be what measures can be taken to ensure that lack of familiarity with dominant rhetorical conventions of their newly adopted academic institutions will not stop second language writers from actively engaging in their disciplinary communities and having their voices heard through their writings. I would like to reiterate that this research study promotes the view that disciplinary communities need to be more prepared to respond to the cultural ways of writing and different rhetorical styles in their international students' texts. Yet, this does not mean that professors have to be experts in the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of all of their students, or that they should be open to different kinds of writing regardless of the requirements of their disciplines. What I have been trying to highlight in this study is the need to incorporate a critical language and culture awareness (Ivanič & Weldon, 1999) into academic literacies and the pedagogical practices in disciplinary contexts. The graduate students participating in this study seemed to be constantly drawing on the perceived differences between their previous literacy practices and the ones dominant in their current educational institutions. Their understanding of the new literacy practices

and their decision to take up/resist them was influenced to a great extent by whether their existing literacy practices were valued in the new context of writing and the nature of their interactions with peers and professors. I believe that rather than understanding the progress of second language writers toward acceptable writing in their disciplines as a linear process and a one-way street, the disciplinary community for its part can also move in the direction of more actively engaging second language writers. While these students are in the process of gaining the linguist and cultural capital to express their ideas and meet the requirements of scholarly writing in their fields, they can also be partners in a dialogic relationship early on in their graduate academic experience. This can be achieved through incorporating alternative writing assignments such as autobiographical reflections and learning journals into content area courses, adopting dialogic response to writing practices such as individual or group talk-around-the-text sessions, and using web-based forums for on going discussions around the writing process. More importantly, at an institutional level, a close collaboration among EAP (English for Academic Purposes) programs, academic writing help centers, and disciplinary areas would be desirable so that the current disjuncture in the practices of these three entities can be replaced with consolidated and complementary efforts to socialize students into the academic discourses of their fields. Two practical suggestions to move in this direction can be the following:

Demystifying Disciplinary Writing in Graduate WID Courses

The situated approach (Atkinson, 2003; Prior, 2004) of the current study to the analysis of academic writing challenges the assumed homogeneity of academic writing in general and argumentative texts in particular. Contrary to the assumption that academic

discourse is an easily identifiable way of writing which can be taught by EAP instructors and revised through academic writing help centers, the study provided evidence for practice of mystery around academic writing (Lillis, 2001), and the position that the soundness of an academic argument has to be treated as a “field dependant” matter (Toulmin, 1964/2003). The fact that students could clearly recognize that their tutors at the writing centers were not familiar with “the way of writing” in their disciplines, or that their general academic writing courses did not prepare them for their writing assignments point to a pressing need for discipline-specific writing instruction at the graduate level. With their focus on “general academic English”, common core academic writing courses taught by ESL instructors not only do not prepare the students for discipline specific writing, but also tend to remain on the periphery of professionalism in many academic institutions (Hyland, 2002).

One alternative to these courses should be credit-bearing WID (Writing in the Discipline) graduate courses offered within different departments and co-taught by writing instructors and disciplinary professors. These courses can focus on deconstructing published articles within the discipline through activities such as extracting the author’s argument and its key components, identifying and evaluating the author’s stance and finding out how the author has linked the argument to the scholarly conversation in the field. Since various disciplinary cultures have their own rhetorical practices, such a pragmatic approach can familiarize the students with the characteristics of the dominant genre and appropriate ways of writing in their field. At the same time, the course can adopt a critical approach to the genre in question as just one possibility out of many ways of writing. This would encourage students to assess their options in a particular situation

rather than assume that their role is only to fulfill certain expectations (Benesch, 2001; Harwood & Hadley, 2004). It would also be an appropriate setting to encourage students to read and respond to the texts in their field in a more dialogic way.

Negotiating Writing Requirements for Content Area Courses

Another way to bridge the gap between the content area professors' expectations and ESL students' understanding of writing assignments and term papers in content area courses would be to develop a close collaboration between peer tutors from writing centers or more experienced graduate students from the field with faculty members offering various content courses. Currently, professors refer their students to academic writing help centers on a regular basis. These centers are usually detached from the actual discipline specific writing requirements, and the tutors there learn about the particular expectations of each professor only through the course outlines that students sometimes share with them when they seek help with their writing assignments. Second language writers, however, often need more space for discussing some of the less obvious principles that underlie the texts they encounter during a course (Lee, 2004). A meaningful collaboration between writing tutors and faculty in the context of the department or specific course would provide these students with a unique opportunity for such interactions. Specifically, these student tutors can help faculty in their efforts to design and draft instructions for writing assignments in ways that would be more accessible for ESL students new to graduate school. Student tutors, particularly those who are successful writers from the same disciplinary area, are especially well prepared to give professors a sense of how ESL students, as readers and writers, will most likely understand an assignment. They can engage in the much needed conversations with

students to negotiate the meaning of writing activates and explain the expectations when the professors might not have enough time to do so. Furthermore, they have experience in providing meaningful feedback to ESL students and addressing their writing problems. Through being involved in the course and directly communicating with the professors, peer tutors would be in a better position to help students understand the course requirements. One of the professors participating in the present study expressed her desire to have the support of a language tutor in the context of her department in the following way:

I would like to see some kind of a liaison, a language liaison that you as a professor could then direct this person to. Not necessarily to edit or proof read their work, but one who would also know about the field and work with them. There was somebody like that this past spring in the faculty, a graduate student working as an RA, but then the position was cut for lack of funding I think. (Professor Watson's interview, June 2005)

While the logistics of making disciplinary teaching assistantships for writing tutors an integral part of graduate courses might initially sound difficult, I strongly believe that it is a worthwhile effort that can pay off in more ways than one. It can make a notable difference in the early educational experience of second language writers and international students, particularly in Social Sciences and Humanities fields where writing is key to academic activities, and where the initial gap between the professors' expectations and the students' understandings of writing in higher education can be frustrating for both parties.

Suggestions for Further Research

I would like to conclude this research project by suggesting some next steps that would lead to a better understanding of second language writers' textual practices and the responses that their texts generate as they go through a process of socialization into disciplinary discourses. Situated qualitative research in second language writing research is relatively new in the predominantly post-positivist field of Applied Linguistics (Atkinson, 2005). For this reason, conducting studies of this kind in different disciplinary and professional contexts, with writers from different linguistic backgrounds at various points in their academic and professional lives would be informative in learning about multilingual writing development. To do justice to the multiple and complex identities of multilingual writers, longitudinal case studies would probably be a more appropriate method of inquiry. The present study is probably one of the first attempts at operationalizing the new, broadened vision that Connor (2004, 2008) has laid out for intercultural rhetoric research. Further inquiries into the cultural dimension of writing informed by new, dynamic understandings of writing cultures and writing ideologies would be possibilities for future research in this area. Finally, for those who might be interested in studying the structure of argumentation in Persian language as a social, cultural and historical construct and its pedagogical implications for teaching writing in the Iranian educational system, there is a vast field of inquiry with very scant literature.

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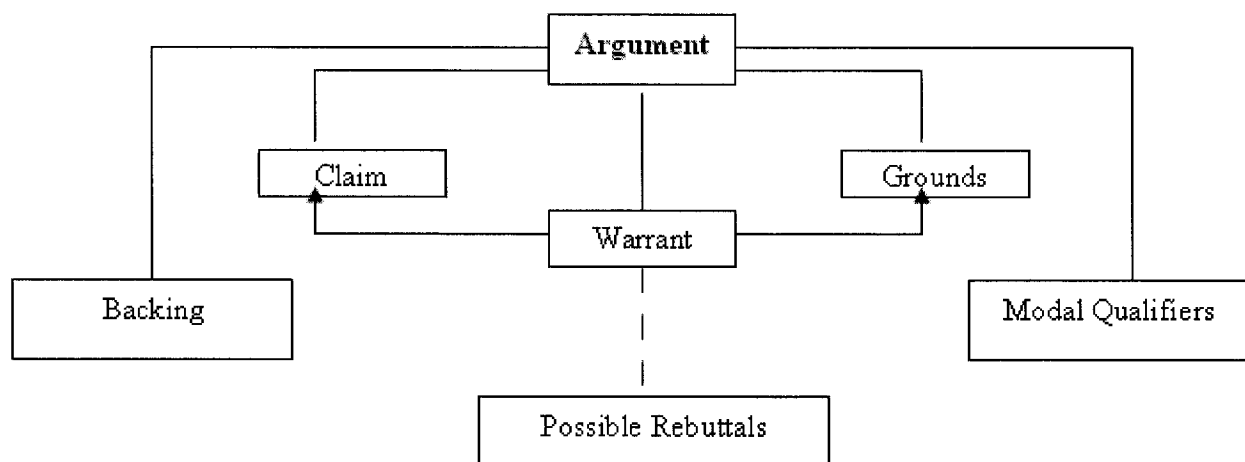
APPENDICES

Appendix A

Elements of Toulmin's (1964) model of argumentation

- *Claim* (the assertion put forward for acceptance)
- *Grounds* (the specific facts that are relied on to support the given claim)
- *Warrant* (the concept or principle indicating if the move from the grounds to the claim is justifiable, and if there is a logical and acceptable link between the two)
- *Backing* (the assurance that the warrant is both trustworthy and relevant in a particular situation)
- *Modal qualifier* (indicating the degree of certainty and the conditions of the validity of the argument, e.g. hedges such as perhaps, possibly, could be, and the like).
- *Possible rebuttal* (counter-arguments and factors and possibilities that might upset the argument put forward)

Figure 1: A visual representation of Toulmin's model



Appendix B

January 2005

Invitation to Participate in a Study

Dear student:

I am a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, and I am doing a study that involves Iranian ESL graduate students currently enrolled in Social Sciences and Humanities programs.

The purpose of the study is to understand Iranian students' experiences with English academic writing. The study will specifically focus on the way the students engage in writing academic term papers.

In case you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to share with me the paper(s) that you will be writing for one of your courses, and take part in three interviews (45-60 minutes each) with me at your convenience over the next semester.

Your participation in the study will be strictly confidential and voluntary. To reciprocate for your contribution, I will be glad to provide you with editing assistance for the paper(s) that you will be writing for your other courses during the semester.

If you are interested in contributing to the study, please contact me for more details by phone or email at:

Thank you very much.

Nahal Akbari

Appendix C

Invitation to Contribute to a Study

Dear Professor,

I am a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, conducting a study that involves Iranian English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) graduate students studying in different Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines. I am writing to you to enquire whether you would be interested in contributing to it.

The Study

As part of their academic activities, ESL graduate students in North American universities are expected to engage in literacy practices of which essay writing is a major component. Although the challenges of writing in higher education are not exclusive to ESL students, the nature and intensity of the problems that first language (L1) and second language (L2) English students experience in learning this academic activity can be dramatically different. While ESL writers, similar to their L1 peers, go through the early stages of enculturation into academic discourses and a transition from being novice members of academic communities to specialists, they are, at the same time, positioned between cultures and languages. One of the major genres of writing that graduate students in the Social Sciences and Humanities are expected to engage in is argumentative writing. The way ESL students from a particular linguistic background organize and structure their argumentative papers, the problems and challenges they might experience in this process, and the professors' insights and expectations regarding this particular aspect of academic writing of ESL students is the concern of the study.

What the Study Involves

In order to explore how the structure of argumentation is understood, received, and evaluated by the professors, I would like to invite you to participate in a short interview session (30-45 minutes) to capture your perspectives and expectations as an educator. I would be interested in learning about your experiences with the writings of your ESL students, the qualities that you expect in their papers with regard to the structure of argumentation, and the kind of feedback you generally provide on this aspect of academic writing.

Some of your ESL students will be participating in the study as well. They will be asked to share with the researcher the paper(s) that they will be writing for your course, and take part in four interviews (45-60 minutes each) throughout the semester. In these interviews, the students will reflect on the process of writing and the challenges they might be experiencing as they construct academic arguments in their texts. They may also share the feedback you might have provided on this particular aspect of their writing with the researcher. To reciprocate for the students' contribution, the researcher will offer to provide them with editing assistance for the paper(s) that that will be writing for their other courses during the semester.

If you are interested in contributing to the study, please contact me for more details.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Nahal Akbari
Ph.D. Candidate
Faculty of Education
University of Ottawa

Supervisor:
Dr. T. Sima Paribakht
Second Language Institute
University of Ottawa
paribakh@uottawa.ca
(613) 562-5800 (ext.3384)

Appendix D
Student Consent form

I,, hereby agree to participate in the research conducted by Nahal Akbari of the Faculty of Education of the University of Ottawa. The study titled Second language writers' texts and textual practices: The case of argumentation in ESL academic writing, is being conducted under the supervision of Professor T. Sima Paribakht. The purpose of the research is to explore argumentative essays and papers written by ESL graduate students as part of their academic activities, and the challenges that engaging in this type of writing in a second language might present to these students.

My participation in the study will consist of sharing with the researcher the drafts and the final copies of the papers that I will be writing for a course during one academic semester, and participating in 4 interviews that each will last 45-60 minutes. These interviews will be about my experiences with academic writing in both my first and second language, the difficulties that I might have with writing academic English, the feedback I receive from my professors on my papers and the way I go about incorporating the feedback into my writings. I further understand that the interviews will not involve any personal or private matters, that they will be done at my own leisure and convenience in the language of my choice, either Persian or English, and that they will be tape-recorded.

The researcher has also informed me that she might interview my professor(s) about their views on academic writing in general, and specifically on the papers that I will share with the researcher.

I have been informed that this study can help me learn about English academic writing, and that I can come to know about professors' expectations with respect to writing argumentative papers. I also know that the results of the study maybe published.

I have been informed that if I decide to participate in the study, I will be compensated for my participation through receiving editing assistance with my papers should I need it.

I am aware that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, before or during an interview, refuse to participate and refuse to answer any interview questions that I might not feel comfortable answering. I also consent to participate in the study on the condition that the information I share with the researcher will remain strictly confidential and my anonymity will be assured through the use of pseudonyms should the results of the study be published or presented at a public forum.

The tape recordings of the interviews and the papers I will share with the researcher will be stored in a locked cabinet in her supervisor's office at the University of Ottawa, and only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to it. The data will be conserved for a maximum period of 10 years.

I understand that for any information about my rights as a research participant I can contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research of the University of Ottawa, 550 Cumberland street, Room 159, (613) 562-5800 (ext.1787), or ethics@uottawa.ca
There are two copies of this consent form, one of which I will keep.

If I have any questions about the conduct of the research project, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Researcher:

Nahal Akbari,
Ph.D. Candidate,
Faculty of Education,
University of Ottawa

Supervisor:

Dr. Sima Paribakht,
Second Language Institute,
600 King Edward Avenue, Room 201A
University of Ottawa
Email address: paribakh@uottawa.ca
Phone: (613) 562-5800 (ext. 3384)

Appendix E
Faculty Consent form

I,, hereby agree to participate in the research conducted by Nahal Akbari of the Faculty of Education of the University of Ottawa. The study titled Second language writers' texts and textual practices: The case of argumentation in ESL academic writing, is being conducted under the supervision of Professor T. Sima Paribakht. The purpose of the research is to explore argumentative essays and papers written by ESL graduate students as part of their academic activities, and the challenges that engaging in this type of writing in a second language might present to these students.

I understand that this study investigates the experiences and challenges that ESL graduate students have with writing argumentative academic papers in English, and the perspectives of their professors with regards to this issue. My participation in the study will consist of one interview session lasting 30-45 minutes. The interview will be about my perspectives, the expectations that I have from students with respect to constructing acceptable arguments in their academic writings and the feedback I generally provide on this particular aspect of writing. I am aware that the interview will not involve any personal or private issues, and that it will be tape-recorded.

I have been informed that some of my ESL students will be participating in the study as well. They will be asked to share with the researcher the paper(s) that they will be writing for my course, and take part in four interviews (45-60 minutes each) throughout the semester. In these interviews, the students will reflect on the process of writing and the challenges they might be experiencing as they construct academic arguments in their texts. They may also share the feedback I might have provided on this particular aspect of their writing with the researcher. To reciprocate for the students' contribution, the researcher will offer to provide them with editing assistance for the paper(s) that that will be writing for their **other** courses during the semester.

I have also been informed that if I decide to participate in the study, it can provide me with insights into the difficulties that international ESL graduate students might be having with certain aspects of their English academic writing.

I am aware that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, before or during an interview, refuse to participate and refuse to answer any interview questions that I might not feel comfortable answering. I also consent to participate in the study on the condition that the information I share with the researcher will remain strictly confidential and my anonymity will be assured through the use of pseudonyms should the results of the study enter public domain. All the data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the office of the researcher's supervisor at the University of Ottawa, and only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to it. The data will be conserved for a maximum period of 10 years.

I understand that for any information about my rights as a research participant I can contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research of the University of Ottawa, 550 Cumberland street, Room 159, (613) 562-5841, or ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of this consent form, one of which I will keep.

If I have any questions about the conduct of the research project, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Researcher:

Nahal Akbari,
Ph.D. Candidate,
Faculty of Education,
University of Ottawa

Supervisor:

Dr. Sima Paribakht,
Second Language Institute,
600 King Edward Avenue, Room 201A
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Email address: paribakh@uottawa.ca
Phone: (613) 562-5800 (ext. 3384)

Appendix F
Semi- structured Student Interview
Sample guiding questions

Give me a little bit of background information about yourself: your first language, your current program of study and educational background, your schooling experiences, etc.

Can you tell me about your experience with writing in your first language? Do you remember any stories or instances of successful or challenging writing experiences in your first language?

Were you ever taught how to write academic papers in Persian? If so, when and at what level? What kind of instruction did you receive? If you took any writing courses, can you explain what they were like and how they were taught?

a) Did you ever receive any instruction about academic writing in English in Iran? If so, when and at what level? What kind of instruction did you receive? If you took any English academic writing courses what were they like and how were they taught?

b) Have you taken any English academic writing courses here in North America
If so, tell me more about it.

Do you find any differences between writing in Persian and English in general? Did your writing experiences in Persian prepare you for the type of writing activities you are engaged in now?

How do you describe academic writing? Can you generally describe the steps you go through when you write a paper? Are these steps different when you write in your L1 and L2? If so, how?

How do you generally feel about yourself as a writer in Persian and in English? What do you find the most difficult aspect of writing in each language?

What role do you think writing plays in your program of studies? Tell me about some of your current (or recently completed) papers. How would you describe your writing experience: Successful? Smooth? Challenging? Stressful?
Are there any particular instances or stories about writing a paper in your program that shape the way you feel about academic writing and you would like to share?

How do professors communicate their expectations to you? To what extent are you familiar with these expectations before you write your paper?

Can you tell me about the kind of feedback that you usually get on your papers from your professors? What issues do they mostly address?

Are there any differences among the professors in the kind and the nature of the feedback they provide? Please explain

How does the feedback you get usually help (or not help) your future writing activities?

Are there any other relevant issues that seem important to you and you would like to comment on?

Appendix G
Professor's Interview
Sample guiding questions

How do you define argumentation in academic writing? What are the main elements of an argument that you generally employ in your own writing, or expect to see in your students' papers?

How important is the quality and structure of the argument in an academic paper? To what extent does it influence your judgment or evaluation of your students' writings?

Do you usually give feedback to your students regarding the quality and structure of their arguments in their papers? Why/why not?

If you do provide feedback in this regard, what are some of the issues that you usually address? How do you communicate your feedback or recommendations for revision to your students, and how extensive is your feedback in general?

To what extent do the ESL students generally meet your expectations with regards to the quality and the structure of the argument in their papers? Do you remember any relevant instances or stories that you may want to share in this regard?

Have you ever noticed any difference between the writings of your L1 and L2 students in terms of reasoning and argumentation? If so, what do you attribute these differences to?

What kind of recommendations and/or supporting strategies do you usually have for your students to improve their argumentative writings?

(Provided that the Professor has given feedback or recommendations for revision on a draft of a paper by a student participant) To what extent do you think the student has managed to incorporate your comment into his/her revised paper in this case? Do you think he/she has clearly understood your comment? Does the revised draft meet your expectations?

Are there any other issues that seem important to you on this topic?