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In the Pursuit of Advanced Academic Literacy: Two Second Language Students’ Experiences in their Initial Semester at a U.S. University

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IN THE PURSUIT OF ADVANCED ACADEMIC LITERACY: TWO SECOND LANGUAGE STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES IN THEIR INITIAL SEMESTER AT A U.S. UNIVERSITY

by

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B.A., Pennsylvania State University, 1999

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In the Pursuit of Advanced Academic Literacy: Two Second Language Students’ Experiences in their Initial Semester at a U.S. University

written by Michael Andrew Regan

has been approved for the Department of Linguistics

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April 24, 2012

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

IRB protocol # 11-0277
In the Pursuit of Advanced Academic Literacy: Two Second Language Students’ Experiences in their Initial Semester at a U.S. University

Thesis directed by Professor Barbara A. Fox

This thesis examines how second language students perceive the challenges of acquiring advanced academic literacy at U.S. universities, by investigating the actions and decisions of two research participants (one female first-year undergraduate and one male first-year graduate) in the process of discourse enculturation into their field of study. Data was collected primarily through personal interviews with the research participants over the course of their first semester of study. Interviews aimed to elicit the participants’ reactions to their course work and how they had managed to cope. Through interviews and document analysis, a data-driven study emerged, reported on in the words of the participants in two personal narratives. The study aims to highlight the importance of the perceptions of second language students in delineating the complex set of variables involved in the process of advanced academic literacy acquisition. This research focus provides greater insight into how different second language students respond to the challenges faced at the undergraduate and graduate levels and may help inform second language teachers and university faculty of the process of U.S. university discourse enculturation as experienced by non-native English speakers. The findings of the study suggest that there is a complex interrelationship between the strategies invoked in response to academic challenges and the academic, professional, and personal goals the research participants were seeking to attain. This interrelationship can be described in terms of individual learning trajectories as they relate to particular contexts of discourse initiation.
The process of reflecting on the past and present is a valuable undertaking, especially when with these reflections the future can be imagined. For her guidance in the creation of the present research project, I would like to express special gratitude to my thesis advisor Barbara Fox, who always greeted me with a smile and a cookie during our advising sessions. Her questions, suggestions, and feedback helped shape my approach to research and writing over the course of many long months, and finally to the completion of this step in my academic career.

I am deeply indebted to the real Riko and Rafael for spending so much time reflecting on your educational experiences so that I could go home and reflect on them some more. May your present situations lead you to the places you most wish to go.

For my wife and daughter, for letting me stay up late and sometimes, even, sleep in. The present will always be ours.
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Chapter One

Introduction

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of the present qualitative research study is to gain a better perspective on the process of gaining advanced academic literacy by second language (L2) students in U.S. university education settings, as perceived by the students themselves in their own voices (Leki, 2001). Important attention has been given in recent studies to how a small number of tertiary education L2 students perceive and respond to the demands of achieving academic literacy (Cumming, 2006; Leki, 1995, 2001, 2007; Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997; Silva, 1992; Silva et al., 2003; Spack, 1997). Studies like these centralize the perceptions learners have of their indoctrination into English-medium academic programs, experiences that are not always fully recognized by curriculum designers, academic administrators, L2 education professionals, and instructors at the university level (Hansen, 2000; Leki, 2001; Leki & Carson, 1994; Reid, 2001). To document the multitude of facets of this academic enculturation, significant research has focused on the struggles L2 learners face individually and collectively in university settings (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1998; Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995; Currie, 1993; Huang, 2010; Silva, 1993), on the strategies they employ to confront these challenges (Leki, 1995, 2001; Riazi, 1997; Spack, 1988; Wong, 2005), and the personal, general education, and on the professional goals they ultimately aim to achieve (Cumming, 2006; Cumming, Busch, & Zhou, 2002; Ferenz, 2005).
The present thesis aims to encapsulate these many facets of academic enculturation as experienced by two second-language students in their first semesters of study at a U.S. university in order to become more informed of their struggles, strategies, and goal setting in the learning of conventions for academic discourse. It is hoped that, as Leki (2004) indicates, by studying ways second-language students make sense of their learning experiences, a better understanding of and a greater appreciation for the process of acquiring advanced academic literacy by L2 students may be gained.

1.1 Qualitative research

Gaining a more informed perspective on how advanced academic literacy is achieved serves multiple purposes. From a pedagogic point of view, being cognizant of students’ social, economic, and academic needs can lead to a greater realization of how to best prepare students in the learning of conventions for academic discourse, a learning aim considered by some to be an ethical requirement (Casanave, 2004; Santos, 2001; Smith, 1997). From an administrative point of view, such perspectives may provide impetus to allow teachers greater flexibility to adapt curricula to individual student needs and, further, encourage them to do so. From the point of view of an educator as public servant working within a specific community, getting to know what students think and feel may help to foster an educational apparatus that, in providing for the needs of the students, provides also for the needs of the larger community. To fulfill these purposes, then, the aim of research in second language studies is, as Benesch (2001) says, “to
capture the complexity of L2 learning in a variety of contexts by students of various social backgrounds” (p. 163).

The number of international students coming to the United States to study at colleges and universities has been increasing year-to-year, with over 720,000 enrolled in 2010-2011, a 5% increase over the previous year and 32% more than a decade ago (Chow & Bhandari, 2012, as quoted on the Institute of International Education website). Concurrently, the urgency of continuing to develop pedagogical approaches that best serve the academic interests of these students also increases (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1998; Cumming, 2006).

However, tending to this growing number of L2 student voices and their specific needs adds another component to the already complex learning/teaching equation in higher education. When teachers begin to take into account international students’ wide array of individual perspectives, designing and implementing course work ideally becomes an interactive, dialogic process. Doing so requires teachers to remain sensitive to the particular time, place, people, and sociocultural context in which learning takes place (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), while the challenge for researchers is to integrate a critical element of research into learning by “studying ways individuals make sense of their experience” (Peirce, 1995 as quoted in Benesch, 2001, p. 164).

Second language students typically face the same variety of challenges throughout the course of their studies in a foreign academic setting, and the students that are successful typically employ a common battery of strategies and tools to manage these challenges. However, students vary in
the amount of L1 writing experience they bring with them to the academic setting, and thus have
developed their own repertoires of strategies to meet the demands of higher education (Leki,
1995; Raimes, 1985). And, although the academic and professional goals of each may be similar
(Smith, 1997), students are privy to a vast assortment of personal goals that interact with all other
aspects of their pursuits, fashioning individual experiences and perceptions that may help shed
light on the complex set of variables at play in the development of advanced academic literacy.

I, like Leki (2001), have set out with the hope to provide a place where students’ voices may be
heard. Foregrounding the perceptions that students have of the demands of second language
academic studies may help inform the practices and policies of L2 writing instructors, teachers-in-training, university educators, and program administrators, through a closer look at the plight,
travails, and achievements of the growing number of non-native English speaking (NNES)
students as they aspire for academic literacy in tertiary education settings. Although adjusting for
all individual students’ needs is largely unattainable in many educational contexts, common
characteristics of L2 students’ experiences may be identified to help instructors remain (1)
sensitive to the challenges of studying in a second language, and (2) informed that, as Leki
(2004) explains, “what it means to be academically literate necessarily varies from one culture to
the next” (p. 116). Armed with this sensitivity and informed of the variation among different
academic literacy practices across cultures, instructors may then be able to decide if
accommodation for individual L2 student needs may be appropriate.
The present thesis takes root in similar qualitative research studies on L2 writers over the last twenty years, as described in the next few sections.

1.2 Goals of earlier qualitative research on L2 writing: A preview of the literature review

Qualitative studies on second language writing make use of personal narratives, case studies, and other ethnographic and naturalistic research methods to better be able to encompass what Leki, Cumming, & Silva (2008) consider “broad-based, social understandings and more inclusive images of L2 writing and writers” (p. 3). Various perspectives have thus been documented, including instructors’ view of writing assignments (Horowitz, 1986), students’ perspectives (Leki, 1995, 2007; Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997; Riazi, 1997; Silva, 1993; Spack, 1997), as well as considering both instructor and student perspectives together (Huang, 2010).

The contexts of L2 writing have also received significant attention since the 1980s, with heavy emphases on undergraduate writing at North American institutions (e.g., Leki, 1995, 2007; Spack, 1997), although a substantial amount of work has been directed to writing at the graduate level (e.g., Hansen, 2000; Riazi, 1997; Silva, 1992), at the pre-university level in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs (e.g., Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995), adult immigrant literacy (e.g., Leki, 2001), and writing done for professional purposes, amongst other contexts.

The focus groups of these earlier studies include international students with visas, whose intentions are largely to remain in the host country only as long as their academic studies last,
immigrant students whose intention may be to stay indefinitely, and Generation 1.5 students, migrants’ teenage children who receive their middle or high school education in the U.S. before enrolling in a university here. The present study contributes to the body of research that has examined L2 students within two of these domains, namely, visa and immigrant students.

Many research studies have had pedagogical focuses, examining the writing process (Zamel, 1982, 1983), students’ recommendations for writing teachers (Silva, 1993), students’ responses to teacher feedback (Leki, 1992), researchers’ recommendations for ESL writing instructors (Reid, 2001; Spack, 1988), and the tasks students might be expected to write at the university level (Horowitz, 1986; Currie, 1993). Additional studies have documented students’ reactions to instructional practices writing across the curriculum (Leki, 1995; Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997; Zamel, 1995), while others have taken a forward look at students’ goals in writing (Cumming, Busch, & Zhou, 2002). Analyses of the various means of socialization into respective discourse communities available to L2 students have also been carried out (Cumming, 1998, 2001).

All of the studies above mentioned have had significant bearing on the shape of the present thesis. However, some studies have been more central than others in the direction the thesis has taken, as discussed in the next section.
1.3 Previous research with significant bearing on the thesis

L2 students in the process of developing advanced academic literacy skills respond to writing demands in a variety of fashions, and in the process create identities as both students and writers (Currie, 1993; Leki, 2007; Spack, 1997).

Currie (1993) reminds educators that the demands facing L2 writers in university studies are complex, including the need to understand and abide by dominant cultural expectations, live up to the cognitive demands of academic pursuits, and demonstrate the knowledge required of their respective discourse communities in often novel or unfamiliar tasks and genres, while at the same time learning to master a second language. Currie points out that educators who do not fully recognize the complexity of these demands may not always express the requirements of discourse enculturation in a clear and concise enough fashion for second language students, a position also taken by Spack (1997), who states that academic discourse “serves a gatekeeping role, preventing students from progressing educationally” (p. 51).

As both novices in their fields and in the language of discourse and as an especial result of disciplinary expectations not always being clearly articulated, according to Currie, many L2 students are “unlikely to learn from either their mistakes or their successes” (p. 113) and may thus miss out on taking full advantage of their educational experiences. Currie suggests that is therefore necessary for educators to better consider the perspectives of second language students...
in order to increase the effectiveness of classroom instruction for these students, a position that
the author of the present thesis also stands by.

Currie (1993), Spack (1997) and Leki (2007) highlight central issues regarding the university
experiences of second language students, including how L2 students respond to a complex
interplay of cultural, cognitive, domain-specific, and linguistic variables. For Leki (2007) and
Spack (1997), however, it is not enough to indicate the extent of the struggles facing L2 students
without also showing how many L2 students eventually do go on to achieve academic success
despite the barriers confronting them.

It is important here to bear this in mind, as the present thesis examines only one semester of
study as reported by the two student participants. The number of struggles confronting these
participants in this single semester was extensive, and what they nevertheless achieved by the
end of the semester may or may not be indicative of their overall later academic success. What
the case studies in Spack (1997) and Leki (2007) will provide, I hope, is at least a small indicator
of a range of possibilities for university-bound second language students in general: struggling
through, yet completing, each semester and later graduating from their courses of study, with
many going on to further graduate studies and successful careers.
1.4 Research gap

Typical central focuses for research into L2 advanced academic literacy include pedagogical issues, writer characteristics, L2 writing processes, textual and grammatical aspects of L2 written discourse, and the contexts for writing (Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008).

Many very valuable case studies have examined these issues in great detail, combing through students’ texts, interviewing teachers, and analyzing course work. Leki (2001), however, writes about her surprise in finding that many studies on L2 writing provide little “evidence that the researchers spent time talking to the students, never asked them one on one what all this (whatever feature of L2 writing was under study) meant to them” (p. 18).

Citing work by James C. Scott, Leki (2001) compares public and hidden transcripts of students’ experiences. Public transcripts are the visible elements of education, e.g., the open dialogue between students and teachers, while hidden transcripts are the discourse that “that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by power holders” (p. 17). The power holders, in the case of education, are primarily administrators and teachers, professional educators who may not take the opportunity to hear directly from students about how things are going in the classroom, in the students’ other courses, and in their lives outside of school. Leki as an educational researcher sets out to hear what students “did and how they did it, what they understood from their experiences, how they constructed what was happening to them...what they said amongst themselves” (p. 18).
Talking directly to L2 students about reading and writing in the university setting, about their interactions with teachers and other students, and about how they make sense of their academic struggles and success is a central feature of this thesis. Documenting students’ self-reported perceptions of the academic experience will help provide better insight into the complex variables of advanced literacy acquisition and help more fully examine additional aspects of L2 students’ academic lives, including the context of their academic enculturation (Leki, 2007). Findings of the present thesis couch possible insight into L2 students’ experiences in terms of contextual and individual factors, relating context, individual students, and their behavior in academic settings. Specific contextual factors include a disciplinary community’s expectations for literacy practices, while individual factors include learner goals, motivation and attitude toward learning, and the students’ willingness to take risks.

A researcher may capture these students’ contextual and individual factors by giving primacy to the students’ perceptions of literacy practices and discourse enculturation and the interaction of these with other aspects of their lives (socioacademic, social, and family-related). The present thesis sets out to enfold these dimensions, interrelating the participants’ specific responses to the demands of achieving academic literacy with the general challenges of and strategies for studying as an NNES student within a tertiary educational setting with the aim of helping L2 students better learn to adapt to the challenges of acquiring academic literacy in U.S. universities.
As such, the present research aims to add to the growing body of *hidden transcripts* that have begun to be documented over the last 20 years. The student participants in the present study each in their own way encountered a variety of challenges, formulated various strategies for success as a response to these challenges, and devised new strategies to help achieve their academic, professional, and personal goals. The interaction of the goals, strategies, and struggles of students at different levels of education (undergraduate and graduate) will provide a further glimpse into the diversity of L2 academic experiences.

### 1.5 Goals of the present thesis

The goals of the present thesis are to compare the struggles, strategies, and goals of L2 students at two different levels of academic pursuit, as self-reported in interviews and then documented in the form of personal narratives. The comparison among L2 students’ perceptions at different levels of academia may show: (1) the extent to which struggles remain consistent for second-language students regardless of the context of their studies, (2) how coping strategies may be devised relative to the demands of their academic course, and (3) how goals may be compared from one academic level to another. Each, in turn, is discussed below.

Instructors are trained to manage the specific needs of second-language students primarily within an Intensive English Program (IEP) context. The illustration of common struggles faced by second-language learners may help strengthen the degree of support from instructors at IEPs.
before the onset of regular university studies, as well as help inform instructors at the undergraduate and graduate levels of L2 students’ general and specific concerns.

An examination of the strategies employed by L2 students may help document which practices are commonly transferred from earlier studies (those learned in L1 instruction, for example, or at an IEP) to be able to refine the instruction of learning strategies that can be imparted at all levels of education as part of regular classroom study (Oxford, 2001).

A classification of L2 learners’ goals may help bring closer together curricular designs and students’ individual needs. If language teaching professionals are, as Smith argues (1997), “ethically bound by students’ own aims” (p. 317), it is clear that our pedagogical approaches should be directed especially by the academic and professional goals the students have (Cumming, 2006). A number of studies have demonstrated how mismatches between teacher and learner orientations may occur, and the reactions of students to educational frameworks with learning goals at cross purposes with their own (Leki, 2001).

The present thesis documents the above elements of L2 students’ struggles, strategies, and goals within personal narratives, the value of which lies in gaining the perspective of the people with the most invested in the educational process, viz. the students themselves (Leki, 2007; Silva, 1992; Spack, 1997). By documenting and cross-analyzing L2 students’ perceptions in the context of personal narratives, it is hoped that knowledge about the relationship among these elements
may be increased to better examine the complexity of academic initiation as actually experienced.

1.6 Research questions

Research was guided by a line of inquiry that reflects the overall goals of the study, i.e. to examine how university-level literacy skills are developed, and what different variables play a part in this development. Addressing this question should help provide insight into the interplay between the reading and writing texts students typically must manage at the university level, the composing processes for writing utilized by these students, and the disciplinary enculturation practices and socioacademic relationships (Leki, 2007) experienced within tertiary education domains.

To begin addressing this question and by considering the emergent data from interviews and the examination of written work, the research questions were formulated as follows:

1) What types of struggles do L2 students encounter regarding written texts, composing processes, and socialization into disciplinary communities?

2) To what effect do L2 students use coping strategies to meet the demands of studying as first-semester undergraduate and graduate students?

3) How do the goals that L2 students set help shape their academic literacy experiences?
Within the framework that these research questions provide, additional objectives for possible investigation in interviews and later data analysis were identified:

- The role of students’ majors
- The role of socioacademic relations
- Impressions of second language studies
- Living in America, and
- Stress management

1.7 Description of the university and IEP

The locale for the present research study is a U.S. public university with a student enrollment of 25,000 undergraduates and 5,000 graduate students. The nearly 1,500 (600 undergraduate and 900 graduate) international students hail from over 80 countries, and are mostly from Asia (60%), Europe (13%) and the Middle East (13%). The countries with the greatest number of students enrolled at the university are: China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, and Japan. Of these students, both undergraduate and graduate, the vast majority seek degrees in Engineering, Business, Physical Sciences, Social Sciences, and Biological and Biomedical Sciences. The mission of the university is to be one of the top public research facilities in the nation within the next 20 years, a mission that is to be achieved in part by promoting the many backgrounds, perspectives, and intellectual pursuits of the faculty and students.
The IEP where the two participants had been or were studying serves a small body (~200) of international students with plans of enrolling in U.S. university programs. Students from Arabic-speaking countries, Asia, Europe, Africa, and South America are represented, with the larger majority planning to begin undergraduate studies and a small segment with intentions of pursuing graduate work. At the time of the study, the program also included coursework for students of business English. Typically, students stay within the program for 6-12 months before beginning regular university studies. The stated mission of the IEP is to help students gain general English language communicative competence, prepare for academic studies, and examine U.S. culture within a safe and supportive educational framework.

The town itself is located in the Rocky Mountains, with a population of nearly 100,000 people, including students. The general atmosphere is open, friendly, and diverse, providing a warm welcome to all students who come to study here.

1.8 Outline of the following chapters

The overall layout of the thesis reflects a tripartite division into three major themes of advanced academic literacy acquisition as experienced by the participants in this research study, namely, (1) Struggles, (2) Strategies, and (3) Setting goals.
In Chapter Two, a review of literature will be presented in which central questions of research into L2 literacy development relevant to the present thesis will be discussed. The first section of the literature review (Struggles) is further divided into three parts:

(i) Texts

(ii) Composing processes, and

(iii) Social construction

The second section of the literature review (Strategies) also has three parts:

(i) Cognitive strategies

(ii) Metacognitive strategies, and

(iii) Social and affective strategies

The third section of the literature review (Setting goals) follows suit:

(i) Personal goals

(ii) Academic goals, and

(iii) Professional goals
In Chapter Three, the methodological framework of the present thesis will be discussed, explaining why the present research method has been chosen, what the guiding research questions are, and how the chosen method aims to answer the research questions as formulated.

In Chapters Four and Five, the personal narratives of each participant will be presented individually, each narrative following the tripartite division of the overall thesis, to the greatest extent possible as the data collected permits.

In Chapter Six, the central themes that emerged from the narratives will be discussed in terms of interpretations, comparison with other research, an explanation and evaluation of the results, an evaluation of the study, an evaluation of advanced academic literacy as a research field, and deductions from the results.

In Chapter Seven, results will be summarized as they help address the guiding research questions of the thesis. Implications of the research will be briefly discussed in terms of future research directions suggested by the results of this study.
Chapter Two

Major controversies of L2 advanced academic literacy:

A review of the literature

2.0 Introduction: Guiding questions

For this literature review, past studies are discussed that address the following central controversies of research into L2 advanced literacy practices.

- What is L2 advanced academic literacy?
- What is the benefit of documenting the self-reported perceptions of L2 students in this field?
- How are strategies and goals related in the development of advanced academic literacy?

In answering these questions, I have also indicated important research methodology, insights, and conclusions that are drawn upon in later parts of the thesis. I have also described exceptional elements of the studies that I have attempted to emulate in the presentation of my own research.
2.1 A framework for L2 advanced academic literacy

A definition suggested by Cumming (1998) for L2 writing can be used as a framework for L2 advanced academic literacy divided into three parts: *text*, *composing processes*, and *social construction*. This framework provides a means of investigating one of the more controversial issues in L2 academic literacy research, viz. the nature of L2 academic literacy itself.

Academic literacy for Ferenz (2005) is *knowledge*, i.e. the “knowledge of the linguistic, textual, social and cultural features of academic written discourse as well as knowledge of English as used by their academic disciplines” (p. 340). Leki (2007), on the other hand, bases her definition of academic literacy on *activity*, i.e. “the activity of interpretation and production of academic and discipline-based texts” (p. 3). Bearing both these definitions in mind, research into L2 writing needs to consider both what students *know* and what they *do*.

Academic literacy in the discourse of a chosen field means acquiring the skills to read and write texts specific to that field. Knowledge of and acting in accordance with discourse conventions for reading and writing is one of the most important skills that L2 students need to acquire in the course of their academic careers (Grabe & Kaplan, 1997; Raimes, 1996).

In order to gain a better perspective on different components of the challenge of acquiring advanced academic literacy, each of the following three sections of the literature review will
describe scholarly work that clarifies the nature of L2 reading and writing in terms of three questions based on Cumming’s definition:

- What is text?
- What are composing processes?
- What is social construction?

2.1.1 Text and textual features

Kaplan states that text is “a complex multidimensional structure, and ... the dimensions involved include at least syntactic, semantic, and discoursal features” (as quoted in Reid, 1990).

Knowledge of texts may be divided into two areas: knowledge of texts as a whole (discoursal features) and of its individual components (incl. syntactic and semantic features, amongst others) (Victori, 1999).

Discoursal features of written texts may be anticipated in terms of genres. Different forms of written genres at the tertiary level include essays, short-answer exam questions, proposals, literacy biographies, and lecture notes. A second perspective classifies genres by function, including procedure (to show how something is done), description (to give an account of an incident), report (to classify an item and describe its characteristics), and explanation (to show reasons for an event or situation) (Hyland, 2003).
Paltridge & Starfield (2007) specify other aspects of holistic textual knowledge as the purpose in writing and reading, the writer, the reader, the relationship between them, and discourse conventions. These discourse conventions include:

- Overall quality
- Linguistic accuracy: Word choice, number of errors, grammatical errors
- Complexity: Length, development
- Lexical features: Figurative language; vocabulary range
- Content
- Mechanics: Spelling, punctuation, orthography, abbreviations and symbols
- Coherence: Unity of paragraphs; cohesive devices utilized

The holistic and discrete components of texts looked at together lay the groundwork necessary to examine the complex set of variables in the development of advanced academic literacy. Other variables need also be clarified, as the research studies presented in this literature review will demonstrate.

### 2.1.2 Composing processes

Multiple factors need to be attended to in order to meet the expectations of an audience, factors that only partly include a writer’s understanding of the components of text creation above described. Discourse-specific challenges for L2 students include how to choose an appropriate
topic for writing, how to adjust to cross-cultural differences in rhetorical style (e.g., how academic styles compare between the U.S. and home country), how to become informed of academic writing organizational principles for students new to higher education as well as students new to a specific discipline, how to learn proper use of appropriate academic register and vocabulary, how to achieve critical analyses in writing, and how to develop an effective, individual writing process for academic texts.

Whereas studies into written texts examine disembodied writing, research into composing processes examines the writer. Composing processes are the means by which a text is created, involving the steps of generating ideas (brainstorming, making notes), focusing (identifying main ideas, considering purpose, audience, and form), structuring (ordering information), drafting, evaluating, and reviewing (assessing impact, editing) (White & Arndt, 1991).

A closer look at research into L2 writing processes reveals that earlier research has examined the nature of L2 writing from the students’ perspectives (Raimes, 1985; Silva, 1992), with some studies comparing the writing done by ESL students with that done by native speakers (Hyland, 2003; Zamel, 1982), while other research has focused on students’ writing in L1 vs. in their L2 (Armengol-Castells, 2001; Leki, 1992).

Important results from these and other studies support how second language writing imposes more cognitive processing demands than writing in the first language (Barbier & Spinelli-Jullien, 2009; Silva, 1993; Spack, 1988), ultimately affecting overall writing speed and quality. When a
student needs to focus on language accuracy, less attention can be given to organization (Zamel, 1982). Fewer words can be held in short-term memory while writing in an L2, affecting planning and general coherence. Further, being less familiar with word connotations and academic registers, L2 writers spend more time focusing on getting the ‘right’ word (Silva, 1992; Victorri, 1999; Zamel, 1983).

Being able to compose thoughts in the first language may be an advantage for L2 writers (Oxford, 1990), a strategy that will later be discussed regarding a research participant in the present thesis (Rafael). However, there has been no consensus by researchers in second language writing on the effectiveness of this learning technique. While some researchers assert that some advantage may be gained planning or composing in the L1 (Uzawa, 1994), others believe that the planning process should be entirely in English (Zamel, 1982).

Examinations of the differences between L1 and L2 composing processes can be carried out with various methodologies to gain additional perspectives on what students actually do as they write in their native and second languages. Computer technology may be used to measure concrete elements of the writing process (Barbier & Spinelli-Jullien, 2009), and also L2 students’ self-reported perceptions (Leki & Carson, 1994) may be considered. Each of these methodological approaches is now discussed.

With the aim of better illustrating differences between L1 and L2 composing processes, recent research proposes that the methodology of studying writing and the writing process may be
effective eschewing ethnographical approaches for one that utilizes computer technology (Barbier & Spinelli-Jullien, 2009). Using such computer resources, Barbier & Spinelli-Jullien examine precise cognitive loads on L2 writers as they compose by concretely measuring L2 writing processes (e.g., pauses, reaction times).

Barbier & Spinelli-Jullien begin with a survey of research that used methodologies typical of ethnographic approaches, e.g., think-aloud practices. These are then compared to their own use of chronometric applications (pauses in writing, fluency) and dual- or triple-task paradigms (asking writers to multi-task while composing to test cognitive load).

Differences revealed between L1 and L2 composing processes include L2 writers’ more pronounced difficulties in planning, greater focus on grammatical and spelling issues, less effective revision processes, formulation of ideas taking twice as long as L1 writers, and slower processing speeds due to a lack of the automatization of language skills (Barbier & Spinelli-Jullien, 2009). Compared to proficient L1 writers, L2 writers typically stick to one writing approach for a task, rather than adjusting approaches in the course of writing.

These empirical studies show precise, real-time demands on L2 writers in their composing processes. The combination of ethnographic elements with objective measurements provides a greater means of comparing writing characteristics across larger research populations. However, this research approach does not emphasize the value of writers’ subjective views of the writing
process, e.g., how students adapt their practices to the real demands of academic literacy over time, an emphasis that the present thesis would like to encapsulate.

In contrast to a research methodology based on computer technology, student perceptions of needs for writing across the curriculum may also be considered. To this end, Leki & Carson (1994) document differences between L1 and L2 writing in a study of 77 ESL students enrolled in regular university courses in order to measure the success of EAP programs in preparing students for tertiary academic pursuits. In the study, Leki & Carson report on what ESL students themselves consider the most useful writing skills learned in EAP programs, as well as their perceived needs writing across the curriculum.

EAP programs prepare L2 students for advanced literacy challenges for at least three reasons: first, university coursework is evaluated based on essay exams, short-answer essays, and research papers; second, many L2 writers have had their first exposure to some types of writing only within pre-university ESL courses; and, third, studying at the tertiary level requires certain levels of proficiency in understanding content of reading, rhetorical skills, language proficiency, and critical thinking skills.

As noted by other researchers (Barbier & Spinelli-Jullien, 2009; Silva, 1992), L2 students’ lack of range of lexis is a frequently expressed need in ESL writing courses. Leki & Carson (1994) relate limited lexical knowledge to writing fluency in that “the respondents’ concerns about time suggest that the desire for more vocabulary and more grammar expresses a need for more speedy
processing of language.” (p. 90). Students express a “desire for efficiency” (p. 91) in writing, since inefficient writing processes were considered the greatest detriment to the overall quality of their writing and cause of general feelings of frustration.

Results show that some students are able to do well in content courses despite some language difficulties. Regardless, many of the participants in the study by Leki & Carson (1994) expressed the following needs to better handle struggles with writing and composing processes:

- Need for task management strategies (finding, selecting, and synthesizing resources);
- Need for more individual attention from university instructors and teaching staff;
- Need for greater reading and writing speed (especially related to exams): NNESs require much more time to read questions than native English speakers (NESs);
- Need for writing that promotes knowledge-transforming vs. only knowledge-telling to help “initiate students into a broader intellectual arena” (p. 97); and,
- Need for teachers and researchers to know student perceptions of educational challenges.

In comparison to empirical studies such as Barbier & Spinelli-Jullien (2009), Leki & Carson (1994) place a special emphasis on the value of self-reported needs by L2 writers. The methodological approach used by Leki & Carson (1994) is valuable as it points directly to elements that can be integrated into more effective instruction for L2 students in both an IEP context and writing across the curriculum. The current thesis aims to contribute further to this methodological orientation by further documenting the self-reported accounts of L2 writers in
advanced academic domains specifically to address the last reported need in the list above, helping teachers and researchers become more aware of L2 student perceptions of academic challenges at the university level.

### 2.1.3 Issues of social construction

One strand of research that is relevant to the current study has examined the interrelationship of personal, social, and academic contexts of writing, extending into the real lives of individuals as they struggle for academic literacy, individuals that Leki (2001) reminds us have “names, histories, personalities, and voices” (p. 65). Social construction in these terms has also been described as enculturation and/or initiation into a discourse community.

Social constructionism examines the social context of learning within terms of the events of the classroom itself and the goals for pursuing academic practices beyond the classroom (Polio, 2001). For linguistic anthropologists within this paradigm, Maybin & Tusting (2011) explain that “language is viewed as an interactional achievement” and social construction is concerned with “issues such as construction of meaning, texts, narratives, and language ideologies; multiple voices and identities” (p. 516). This suggests the importance of understanding “how social, linguistic and cultural processes are dynamically configured” (*ibid.*) for research within educational contexts,
A close examination of the relationships that are fostered within the educational community is a necessary component of a definition for academic literacy practices, since, as Winch and Wittgenstein argued, “explaining human actions requires an understanding of the forms of life established in the society wherein the action is carried out” (von Daniels, 2006, p. 447). Leki (2007) examines these socioacademic relations, defining them as “a category of social interaction with peers and with faculty that proved to be critical to the students’ sense of satisfaction with their educational work and sometimes even to the possibility of doing that work” (p. 14). Socioacademic relations prove critical to the development of advanced academic literacy practices, and ultimately to how the participants define themselves within their discourse communities.

To document the demands of acquiring advanced academic literacy as related to discourse initiation at the tertiary level by second language learners, longitudinal studies have followed individual students through extended periods of their academic careers, considering the perceptions of ESL students as well as faculty members teaching them (Currie, 1993; Zamel, 1995), with some focusing on the experience of L2 undergraduate students (Leki, 2007; Spack, 1997) and others on students seeking graduate degrees (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1998; Riazi, 1997). Of primary interest in regards to the results of these studies is the interplay of sociocultural factors in L2 students’ learning development, factors that include Vygotskian notions of mediation, internalization, and the Zone of Proximal Development. The present thesis adds to the growing body of literature that places L2 students’ experiences of social constructionist practices as a central component of researching advanced academic literacy
practices, with the aim of supporting how an examination of the context of L2 writing is needed to demonstrate what L2 writers do (Hansen, 2000; Leki, 1995, 2001; Riazi, 1997; Wong, 2005).

One means of demonstrating challenges specific to L2 students regards how each discipline and every classroom may be considered distinct cultures (Zamel, 1995), thus providing additional room for debate into how L2 students may be best enculturated into their discourse communities and why it is essential that this enculturation be facilitated, a point which will now be discussed.

Zamel (1995) and Leki (2001) place heavy emphasis on the importance of students’ voices being heard in academic contexts. Zamel (1995) believes that “the students’ perspective is one that faculty often hear little about” (p. 511), although students’ perspectives must be recognized if instructors are to “understand the role they need to begin to play in working with all students” (p. 511). Zamel indicates that a central difficulty for L2 students seeking to enter disciplinary communities results from these students feeling alienated from the classroom culture because of their real or perceived deficiencies in English language abilities, an ESL problem that the second language students surveyed made suggestions for remedying.

In order to investigate these feelings of alienation experienced by L2 students, Zamel interviewed faculty staff members who had worked with ESL students and conducted a survey of 325 ESL students enrolled in regular university courses over two years. Results of the study revealed frustrations from both the perspective of the faculty members and of the students.
Zamel asserts that the divergent views that L2 students bring to the classroom can be beneficial for the overall classroom culture. The task of helping L2 students join a discourse community is not only the responsibility of ESL instructors, but also of all faculty members who must realize that “the process of acquisition is slow-paced and continues to evolve with exposure, immersion, and involvement, that learning is responsive to situations in which students are invited to participate in the construction of meaning and knowledge” (p. 517).

Results of a study by Currie (1993) support this view. Currie (1993) directed her attention to a first-year university business course, interviewing course instructors, a TA, and three ESL students as well as analyzing weekly assignments, class handouts, lecture notes, textbooks, and students’ written work. The results of the study suggest that there is little explicit help for students in navigating the initiation process into discourse communities since expectations for becoming a member of a discipline are often left unspoken and the relation of assignments to the longer-term goal of becoming a member of a field may be unclear, a situation especially problematic for NNESs.

Elements of the narratives in the present thesis further support this conclusion. The research participants in the present study will also help show how L2 students have different reactions to the predicament of little help being offered to navigate academic initiation processes. One participant seemingly accepts this circumstance (Rafael), while the other (Riko) makes every attempt to seek out help to clarify expectations and assistance for her own academic enculturation.
Besides perceived alienation due to language difficulties, L2 students also face the challenge of adjusting the expectations of their native culture to the cultural expectations of U.S. universities, as studies by Angelova & Riazantseva (1998) and Riazi (1997) wished to highlight. A comparison of the results of these two studies in terms of cultural and domain-specific literacy issues follows.

For Angelova & Riazantseva (1998), the difficulties that L2 students face at the tertiary level stem from differences between the conventional academic practices of local and foreign universities. The growing number of international students entering U.S. graduate programs exacerbates the situation, especially when these students are largely unfamiliar with the content knowledge of their discipline and the skills necessary to read and write professional discourse. Beginning with the question of whether L2 students should be evaluated by the same standards as native English-speaking students, the authors go on to examine the struggles that four first-year graduate students in Education faced in the process of acquiring domain-specific academic literacy. The authors also discuss the coping strategies the students used to confront these problems, as well as pedagogical practices that may help to “minimize” (p. 6) the challenges of this process, issues that are also discussed by Riazi (1997) in his study of L2 graduate students’ perceptions of writing assignments.

Riazi (1997) examines how domain-specific literacy was acquired by four Iranian graduate students in Education with the goal of demonstrating “specific aspects of the complexity of
writing in L2 in the context of a graduate program” (p. 106). Riazi notes that most earlier research focuses on either tasks, contexts, strategies, or learning, but none examine how these factors interact to “enable a writer to produce a text or to become better at doing so” (p. 106). Riazi places an emphasis on studying graduate students’ writing in particular due to the need for these students to write for other members of their fields utilizing specific discourse conventions and applying domain-specific knowledge.

The findings of Angelova & Riazantseva (1998) and Riazi (1997) are significant as they both point out the predominance of cultural and domain-specific literacy issues as central concerns for international students at the university level. Both of these studies also highlight the importance of balancing research on the challenges that students face in this environment with the strategies that they employ to overcome these challenges. The present thesis would like to extend this portrayal of advanced academic literacy pursuits by considering the weight of goal setting within the context of struggles and strategies. Furthermore, whereas Angelova & Riazantseva (1998) and Riazi (1997) both focused on graduate students within their research, the present study would like to make a comparison between the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students, which little research until the present time has focused on.

2.2 Methodological approach: Importance of students’ perceptions

A recent trend in L2 academic literacy research has been a move away from disembodied conceptions of text to the varied reactions of students to writing assignments. Significant
research over the last 25 years exemplifies this trend, considering faculty perceptions of university writing tasks (Horowitz, 1986), student perceptions of writing tasks (Hansen, 2000; Leki & Carson, 1997), and student perceptions of differences between L1 and L2 writing (Silva, 1992). Research studies such as these help show that (i) a disembodied view of text reveals little about how students may actually perform with that task, (ii) viewing text outside of its formal features and considering the demands students face can be more informative in regards to students’ performance, and (iii) the demands of linguistic processing (grammatical and lexical accuracy) is a significant factor in students’ reactions to writing. To help illustrate these points, a study into faculty perceptions of writing tasks (Horowitz, 1986) is examined first.

Since it is the faculty that design writing assignments and establish their place within a specific course and as part of the overall education, an instructor’s perception of writing tasks is a good place to start an examination of university written texts. To this end, Horowitz (1986) compiled a taxonomy of writing genres at the university level through an analysis of course syllabuses and handouts for undergraduate classes. Although the list compiled by Horowitz is not complete (only 5% of faculty solicited responded to his inquiries), it does indicate the general nature of genres university students may be expected to write, as envisioned by the faculty members who designed the course work. Common genres of university writing identified include:

- Summary/reaction to reading
- Annotated bibliography
- Report on participatory experience
One result of the study by Horowitz (1986) is that undergraduate and graduate writing is often based on short-answer exam questions, writing that incorporates primarily having to make a connection between theory and data and synthesizing multiple sources in order to draw necessary inferences in a concise fashion. However, mismatches between how a writing assignment was conceived by an instructor and how it is viewed by students may occur. To help show this, the formal nature of assignments can be compared with student perceptions of these tasks to highlight the challenges students face across different text types, a research platform taken up by Leki & Carson (1997).

Leki & Carson (1997) examined different types of texts that students need to write in English courses and across the curriculum to examine the extent to which students’ own perceptions of writing tasks are crucial to understanding the larger context of writing education. Three types of texts common to university coursework were identified in their study: compositions based on personal experiences, essays written as a response to a source text, and text-responsible prose to demonstrate understanding of a text.
Leki & Carson interviewed L2 students in two phases of in-depth interviews: Phase 1 involved eight undergraduate and 19 graduate students in English classes for NNESs, and for Phase 2 seven undergraduates and 14 graduate students in English classes and regular courses. Phase 1 examined students’ reactions to writing under the first two conditions (personal writing and responding to a source text), while Phase 2 examined reactions to the third type of writing (text-responsible prose in content courses).

Results from Leki & Carson (1997) illustrate an important point bearing on the research direction of the present thesis. Faculty often envision text types in terms of the formal features of each genre and the assumed need for students to become familiar with these features through the course of study, a view supported by the research direction taken by Horowitz (1986). Leki & Carson (1997), on the other hand, consider specific difficulties that students experience with different tasks in regards to features that course instructors are not always cognizant. How a task is envisioned by an instructor is not always indicative of how it will be perceived by the students who undertake the task.

The value of student perceptions of writing tasks can also be exemplified by asking students to compare L1 and L2 writing. Silva (1992), for example, focuses on the experiences and self-reflections of writers, asking students in his graduate-level ESL writing course to reflect in writing on their self-perceived differences between writing in their L1 and L2, and what advice they would give to writing teachers. Silva points out that L2 students often have fairly advanced skills in their L1 and firm beliefs about writing in general. Although writing instruction is
typically focused on the process of writing, many students worried more consistently about grammatical accuracy. This is significant for the present thesis as it provides a clear source of difficulties for L2 writers, in that the linguistic processing needed to accurately write in a second language affects all other decisions writers have to make.

2.3 Considerations for learning strategies

Research into general learning strategies has been directed by questions attempting to elucidate how learners learn language, how their efforts can be self-directed, and what is known about the learning process (Wendin & Rubin, 1987). Strategies that students employ to meet the demands of academic writing in a second language (Leki, 1995) as well as those for general language learning have been documented (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden & Rubin, 1987).

Some studies examine writing as related to cognitive factors (Barbier & Spinelli-Jullien, 2009; Zamel, 1982), while others base their studies on contextual factors (Currie, 1993; Horowitz, 1986; Leki, 1995; Spack, 1988; Riazi, 1997). The framework of this section of the literature review on strategies follows a tripartite division into: metacognitive, cognitive, and social and affective strategies. Each section begins with necessary definitions and an outline of the research reviewed. Questions that are to be examined include:
• What is a successful L2 writer?
• What factors increase L2 writers’ chances of success?

2.3.1 Metacognitive strategies

*Metacognitive knowledge* as defined in Victori (1999) is the “awareness of the requirements and processes involved in undertaking [a] task” (p. 538). For O’Malley & Chamot, this involves “thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring the learning task, and evaluating how well one has learned” (p. 137). This section looks at an educator’s recommendations (Spack, 1988) for how L2 students may apply metacognitive strategies to improve their chances of academic success, specifically in regards to how students may plan for their learning.

Spack (1988) describes course-specific approaches and general strategies that motivated, self-directed L2 students may employ to achieve their academic literacy goals as they plan for their learning, the first metacognitive strategy here examined.

The ideal situation for many writing students is a learning environment which supports Vygotsky’s *Zone of Proximal Development* to provide learners with increased contact with discipline-specific skills through close work with a more-proficient member of the field. Planning to closely observe how instructors carry out tasks helps L2 students prepare to better accomplish learning objectives. This can be done by making an effort to seek out and find
models of writing, actively researching the conventions of discipline-specific texts, and
generally, as Spack says, learning “from teachers who have a solid grounding in the subject
matter and who have been through the process themselves” (p. 40).

L2 students must take it upon themselves in their planning processes to consider where to seek
out this expertise, e.g. in writing centers, from their regular instructors, and conferencing with
their ESL writing instructors when possible. When these resources are not available, then the L2
student must plan to learn from outside texts since “intellectual socialization may be
accomplished not only by interacting with people, but also by encountering the writing of
others” (Bizzell, 1986 as quoted in Spack, 1988).

The results of Spack (1988) are significant for the present thesis as they will provide a basis for a
comparison between the participants here documented in terms of metacognitive strategies,
specifically regarding how L2 students may plan for success when they realize their academic
survival depends on it.

2.3.2 Cognitive strategies

*Cognitive strategies*, for Wendin & Rubin (1987) refer to “the steps or operations used in
learning or problem-solving that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning
materials” (p. 23). For O’Malley & Chamot (1990), they involve “interacting with the material to
be learned” (p. 138). How learners actively engage in the learning process on a cognitive level,
i.e. in a direct and often conscious fashion, is the most observable factor affecting their success through the course of their educational careers. The use of cognitive strategies is often the difference between a successful and unsuccessful student, as Victori (1999) explored.

For Victori (1999), effective learning can be demonstrated as a relationship between the process of writing, the cognitive strategies employed while writing, and general L2 knowledge. To this end, Victori compares the writing skills of four Spanish undergraduate students in advanced EFL classes as part of an examination of differences between successful and unsuccessful L2 writers.

Results of her study show that more proficient writers focus on global text issues (e.g., coherence, restructuring ideas), while less proficient writers focus primarily on lexical and grammatical issues. Noticeable differences in the use of strategies during writing emerged in terms of planning ideas, organizing ideas, evaluating, and resourcing. Less effective writers demonstrate a lack of effective cognitive strategies, little awareness of their own writing struggles, and limited knowledge of how to complete writing tasks.

2.3.3 Social and affective strategies

*Social and affective strategies* for O’Malley & Chamot (1990) involve “interacting with another person to assist learning or using affective control to assist a learning task” (p. 139). This section examines social and affective strategies as perceived by an undergraduate student in the process of joining a discourse community over three years (Spack, 1997).
Spacc’s 1997 report is a longitudinal study which followed a Japanese student, Yuko, over the course of her first three years as an undergraduate in a U.S. university. Spack compiled an extremely rich account of Yuko’s experiences through multiple interviews and access to her writing from both her regular classes and the ESL composition class that Spack was teaching. The strategies Yuko employs to achieve academic literacy and integration into a discourse community are a central theme of the case study.

Yuko’s challenges include both academic and cross-cultural issues, issues that led to initial demoralization after her first year of study (prompting her to return home and wish to desist): her “perceived lack of background knowledge” (p. 12) of U.S. issues, differences in academic discourse styles, her inability to engage in some academic written genres, the academic register used by professors and the impact this has on her note-taking abilities, and her accent in speaking.

A result of Spack (1997) is to demonstrate how the first few years of academic enculturation are the most difficult for L2 students. Students who learn to cope with the challenges faced in the transitions to second language, culture, and academic discourses do so by learning to employ strategies to help them successfully join a disciplinary community.
2.4 Considerations for learning goals

An inquiry into the nature of goals for L2 literacy acquisition may include investigations into the following components:

- A context for the goal to take place in
- A link to long-term aspirations
- Concerted focus on actions taken to achieve the goal, and
- Directed attention to the object of the goal

(Cumming, 2006)

In this section, each of these components is looked at separately from the perspective of different research projects. First, Leki (2001) investigates the relation of study context to goal setting from the point of view of how curricular goals may not meet students’ expressed goals; second, Cumming, Busch, & Zhou (2002) examine specific long-term aspirations that a group of L2 writers have; next, Ferenz (2005) focuses on one specific action that students take to help achieve their goals, namely fortifying socioacademic relationships; and, finally, Smith (1997) demonstrates a link between the object of professional, career-oriented goals with L2 writers’ academic progress. Each of these is discussed in turn.
2.4.1 Context of goals: Misalignment of student and instructor goals

Leki (2001) discusses the “hidden transcripts” of students as reported in published case studies. Each of the cases she describes is indicative of how personal goals may be misaligned with the instructor’s goals.

For example, one case study examines four L2 writing students who are permanent residents in their country of study as they move from high school to college. In high school, the students are praised for their hard work; in college, they are labeled ESL students with writing deficiencies. In college, the four students are placed in bridge-writing classes instead of with mainstream students. The writing context in these bridge-classes is geared towards students who will not stay in the U.S. long. The teachers here treat the four permanent resident students as ‘foreigners,’ even though they consider themselves Americans. One result of this was that the writing assignments (e.g. ‘Compare your home country with the U.S.’) are not entirely appropriate for this group. The group ended up feeling the writing course was “useless, at worst insulting and undermining of their senses of self” (p. 21).

A study about Mexican Americans studying at a small community college (Losey, 1997) shows how teachers do not always consider their students’ goals when creating a course. The students in this case wanted a course that would help them find better jobs; the teacher took it upon herself to attempt to initiate the students into advanced academic writing practices. The students are
asked to write papers for which they have little or no background. The students’ personal goals and their initial high motivation were of no account.

2.4.2 Long-term aspirations: Academic goals and learning intentions

Understanding L2 writers’ academic goals is important in the design of teaching methodologies and to attain a better understanding of the psychology of learning. Research into learning goals must examine the sources that influence the goals a student has, as well as those of the greater educational context in order to determine if the goals of an institution/instructor correlate with the goals of the students (Leki, 2001; Smith, 1997).

To this end, Cumming, Busch, & Zhou (2002) study six adults of different language backgrounds learning to write English in an ESL pre-university setting. Learning intentions can be described based on students’ self-evaluations of writing purpose and task performance.

The authors believe that a study of learning goals is a necessary component of general studies into learning strategies, which must be “analyzed in reference to the goals people have to motivate and guide their task performance” (p.193). Intentional learning structures instruction not on strategies, but rather on goals (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). As the authors indicate, “understanding the goals that students have, for example, for second-language learning writing, is fundamental to understanding not only how they approach learning but also to evaluating how well they can do so, or be helped to do so, under the conditions they experience” (p.193).
Results show that students conceptualize writing as learning: language, heuristics, and written genre conventions. The most frequent goals for writing include: improving vocabulary and grammar, learning aspects of rhetoric (organization), improving composing processes (speed), and gaining familiarity with different genres. General academic goals are directed towards future academic studies, passing tests, and career plans.

Cumming, Busch, & Zhou (2002) examine the origin of goals for L2 writing in five different ways: i) the different angles that help elucidate the nature of goals, ii) who has the responsibility for establishing academic goals, iii) the relationship between strategies to achieve goals and the goals themselves, iv) which problems and challenges may be associated with different goals, and, most importantly, v) the steps needed for the identification of goals. Cumming, Busch, & Zhou (2002) express the desire that other researchers utilize this framework in their own studies. With this in mind, one specific means of identifying goals as Cumming, Busch, & Zhou (2002) envisioned is illustrated in a study by Ferenz (2005) below.

2.4.3 Taking action: Constructing social identity

Ferenz (2005) postulates that the goals of L2 students may be identified through the interrelationship of constructing a social identity and the acquisition of advanced academic literacy. For her study involving six NNES graduate students in different disciplines, Ferenz begins with the assumption that students’ acquisition of academic literacy is dependent on their
socioacademic relations, i.e. their relationships with students, teachers, advisors, and classmates.

The purpose of the investigation is to examine the role of socioacademic relations in the development of these graduate students’ academic literacy and explore the reasons why some students are not able to gain access to the discipline-specific social and academic network that would help in the acquisition of academic literacy.

Using self-reported data, interviews and questionnaires, a description of the participants’ academic and social environments in terms of L1 and L2 emerged. In this description, the centrality of participants’ academic relationships with teachers, thesis advisors, and peers is revealed. Ferenz describes participants’ self-categorization within their academic context and their context-related goals, e.g., if the participants define themselves more in terms of their future profession, their present academic students, or their personal interests. Ferenz, in her study, wants to demonstrate a relationship between these higher-level goals and the overall development of integration into a discourse community.

Ferenz (2005) shows that academic social networks are crucial to the development of advanced academic literacy in terms of how goals are first set. Only after goals are set can effective literacy practices be established to develop discipline-specific content knowledge and L2 language skills. The participants who were seeking academic goals established ties within their discourse community to promote their acquisition of advanced academic literacy, while the participants who defined themselves in terms of professional goals sought and achieved mainly general literacy. The self-reported goals that students have can serve as an indication of the type
of academic literacy ultimately achieved, an issue that will be explored as related to the experiences of the two participants of the present study.

2.4.4 Objects of goals: Writing courses as gatekeepers to career advancement

Smith (1997) examines what students really want out of a higher education, from their own point of view. Smith from the outset establishes that the function of writing courses is gatekeeping, the process of selecting who can and who cannot advance through higher education. In spite of other, perhaps more altruistic pedagogical intentions ESL writing instruction might be good for, writing courses for Smith are only a function that teachers must perform in the service of an elite corporate society.

Using informal classroom discussions and questionnaires distributed at the beginning of a term with students in his second language classes, as well as integrating parallel research, surveys, and introspection, it becomes evident that students enter higher education with the goal of getting a good job, a job that offers the possibility of doing “something responsible, something that offers some scope for creative thinking and decision-making” (p.303), a job that promises above all upward mobility. In his study, 2/3 of the students rated career-enhancement as the primary reason for attending college. Reflecting on the value of language learning in this process, students seem to want to learn the rules of English because they realize rules of style and proper grammar do serve gatekeeping functions. Students therefore expect teachers to teach them these rules to facilitate future career enhancement.
The importance of this study relates to the function that ESL writing classes and second language instruction are expected to carry out. According to Smith, instructional frameworks that do not address students’ future professional needs, that do not help students to reach their top-level of goal of securing a better job, are not living up to the expectations of the students, regardless of the good intentions instructors have.

2.5 Conclusion: Essential issues reviewed

A discussion about student struggles, especially at the outset of a research study, is not meant to emphasize the difficulties L2 students regularly face over all other factors of academic studies, especially considering how successful many of these students one day become. Documenting the challenges inherent in the process of learning, however, may help university instructors better appreciate the complexity of the task facing second language students as they strive to acquire advanced academic literacy. Leki (2001) gives at least two reasons why this type of focus is necessary in a description of L2 academic literacy practices:

- To describe “possible human responses to the human condition -- or even just to the L2 writing class condition,” and
- To garner means of “further reflection” among education professionals whose students include NNESs (p. 26)
One goal for instructors is to match teachers’ and educational context learning aims with those of the students, since a possible mismatch may otherwise occur (Leki, 2001). Leki, Cumming, and Silva (2008) remind us that although “learners have looked to L2 literacy classes to further their aims, the classes have been less successful than they might have been, sometimes because the focus of the classes themselves was inappropriate, sometimes because the learners’ goals, made explicit or not, did not converge with the goals of the literacy class” (p. 51). With this in mind, the present thesis aims to highlight the goals of two L2 students of higher education, and investigate how these goals relate to the struggles they face and the strategies used to overcome these struggles, although it is realized their goals may not always converge with that of their course work.

Therefore, providing an exploration of two L2 students’ experiences in their first semester of study at a U.S. university, may further reflection on their trials and triumphs proceed.
Chapter Three
Methodology

3.0 Introduction: Initial inquiry

A qualitative research enterprise begins with an interest in an area, an interest that inspires an inquiry to be made (Freeman, 2009). From this inquiry, a general notion about a research project springs, along with ideas for a study setting, impressions about participants to involve, and appropriate research procedures to utilize. Data collection ensues, eventually leading to the exciting prospects of data analysis (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). It is at this point that research questions in qualitative studies can be formulated, helping to prevent any preconceived ideas from interfering with the outcomes of the study (Wolcott, 1992). As analysis proceeds, additional insights are gained to help further hone research questions. Thus, the recursive process goes on, weaving back and forth between thoughts, intuitions, and findings. Slowly, the initial inquiry acquires a more substantive form, research questions become more clearly defined, and the claims necessary to respond to these begin to take shape.

The inquiry that drove the present thesis has as its basis my experience as an ESL teacher at the pre-university level in an IEP, whose mission is to serve as a stepping stone into U.S. universities by helping second language students develop the academic tools, skills, and English-language know-how that will be required of them in their future academic endeavors. When the students
complete their English language studies, they pass out of the doors of the IEP with hardly ever a glance back, often never to be heard from again.

Watching so many students come and go in this same fashion, it’s natural to wonder what becomes of their pursuits and if and how they manage in the end to reach their goals at the university level. Being more informed of the students’ experiences would provide me with an opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of the IEP in preparing students for higher education demands. To know something about what comes of the students’ dreams and aspirations might also help me realize a more clearly defined purpose for my own teaching, tailoring more specifically to students’ future academic needs and learning goals.

This is where my inquiry began, with the desire to find out more about what became of students’ academic undertakings once they left the IEP. Following students one step further into the more demanding atmosphere of real university studies should arm second language and regular university instructors with improved insight into how to better prepare L2 students for success in regards to the academic language and skills, and perhaps accommodation, these students may need to get by.

3.1 Terms defined

Terms common to second language teaching and repeatedly used in this thesis are defined here.
• Second language (L2) students are referred to by various names across the literature, including English as a Second Language (ESL), non-native English speakers (NNEs), bilingual, and multilingual students. In the present thesis, all of these terms may be used to refer to the same set of students, with L2 writing and writers being the default denomination. This choice of terms, of course, does not imply that English may not also be for some students a third, fourth, or otherwise additional language.

• Texts: Written texts at the university level include both short responses to exam questions, short and longer compositions, and notes taken in a course. Texts may also be used here to refer to reading done at the university level, including course books, assignment prompts, and other course handouts.

• Academic literacy: as defined by Spack (1997) is “the ability to read and write the various texts assigned in college” (p. 4); or, according to Leki (2007), “the activity of interpretation and production of academic and discipline-based texts” (p. 3).

• Intensive English Program (IEP): Refers to intensive (in some cases, 20 hours/week of language lessons), pre-university English language courses that many L2 students are either required to take by a university before becoming a regular student (so-called conditional enrollment), or which the students choose to take in order to gain proficiency in academic English language skills.
• *English for Academic Purposes (EAP):* The educational curriculum that guides instruction at an IEP. As Hansen (2000) defines it, EAP refers to “The general term for the courses developed to address the academic writing needs of both undergraduate and graduate ESL students” (p. 28).

### 3.2 Research participants

The students who participated in the present study had studied at the IEP where I was an ESL instructor. They both had previously been students of mine (in either an advanced speaking-skills development class or a test-preparation class), providing me with a good sense of their language skills beforehand as well as alleviating the need to get to know one another before beginning the interview process. They both had completed the highest level of academic English study at the IEP, and both would soon begin regular academic studies at the local university, Riko as a first-year undergraduate, and Rafael as a first-year graduate student.

Throughout the thesis, the two participants in my research study will be referred to by pseudonyms: Riko and Rafael.

• **Riko** is a 39-year old female from Japan with a Bachelor’s degree in English from a university in Tokyo. She is a single mother who just gained half-custody of her four-year old son. She studied at the university’s IEP for more than a year, completing the most advanced levels of the academic English program as well as one level of the business English program. This Fall she
began her first semester as an undergraduate student at the university, with the intent of majoring in Psychology in order to become a social worker.

- **Rafael** is a 27-year old male from Chile with a Bachelor’s degree in Environmental Sciences from his home university in Santiago. He came to his U.S. university on a Fulbright scholarship, arriving six months before his first semester to study English at the university’s IEP. His first semester as a PhD student in Atmospheric Sciences began in Fall, 2011.

**Why these participants were chosen**

In the course of teaching, many students stand out as exceptional in one way or another, whether it be in terms of personality, achievements, intellectual stamina, or goal orientation. Riko had been a student of mine in an 8-week TOEFL preparation class, and Rafael in an advanced listening and speaking course. Both Riko and Rafael demonstrated in their coursework a personalized approach to academic studies and a firm resolution to succeed, each and every lesson.

Riko consistently demonstrated her intense devotion to studies, an unmatched eye for detail, and a remarkable motivation to achieve academically (completing all assignments on time, maintaining email contact with me throughout the course with questions about feedback, and a strong in-class persona). Rafael impressed me especially in terms of his self-confident nature (which may be attributed to his being one of the few future graduate students at the IEP surrounded by future undergraduates), his interest in receiving feedback on his presentations and
homework assignments (which, however, he admitted to me later, he paid only a passing glance), as well as punctuality.

When it later came to my attention that these two students were planning to begin regular academic studies in the Fall, 2011, my own thesis preparation had already gotten under way. They were the first two students I considered for the interview process, and both readily accepted.

3.3 Interviewing and examining

As a researcher new to qualitative means of inquiry and interviewing, I had a lot to learn to orient myself within an acceptable research tradition and to apply an effective methodological tool of investigation. Two primary modes of data collection for my qualitative inquiry were decided on: interviewing and the examination of student-generated written texts (Wolcott, 1992). Each of these would present challenges in the course of research, particularly concerning productive interactions in the interview format and the patience to sort through “piles of raw data” (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 195).

The first challenge of the interview process involved knowing how to listen well and respond appropriately. In itself, the skill of listening in a question-answer format is the sign of an effective classroom manager, for the type of teacher who wishes to respond to students’ input in a humanistic fashion. The demands of the interview (gathering data in line with potential research
directions) and the goals of a classroom lesson (achieving lesson aims) complicate what is otherwise a very natural event: listening to what people have to say and knowing how to respond accordingly.

The second challenge of interviewing involved the piles and piles of raw data that began to amass. I needed to employ an effective and efficient means of organization, categorization, and analysis that would lead to a compact, manageable data base, and then to formulate a qualitative research study that would allow data to emerge (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Wolcott, 1992) for a narrative inquiry format to be possible (Murray, 2009).

The steps I took to organize the data were: first, implement suggested guidelines for data collection procedures; second, foresee problems that were likely to occur in the process of interviews; and, third, formulate an appropriate interview structure that would allow the necessary conditions to be able to document well what the participants perceptions. A description of how these three issues were managed follows.

3.4 Guidelines for data collection

The primary source of data for this research was a series of in-depth, face-to-face, audio-recorded interviews with two second language students over the course of approximately six months. Through these interviews I gathered a rich impression of the participants’ experiences by
exploring topics that each participant raised. Different strategies were used for different interviews, including an open, conversational approach as well as semi-structured formats.

The second tool of inquiry included the collection of additional data, from:

• Materials from the courses the students were taking, including descriptions of assignments, course syllabuses, texts being read, and study guides;
• Essays and short-answer examinations they had completed;
• Written feedback to the participants from instructors;
• Course syllabuses;
• Email communication between myself and the participants; and,
• Interview notes

Examination of all these additional materials was meant to improve the credibility of the study through triangulation of data, the gathering of different perspectives of the research situation (Croker, 2009).

**Internal value constraints**

The nature of the study, initial research questions, time commitments, preferred place for interviews (the language school), protocol for storing data, the request for audio-recording during interviews, and commitment to keep all information in strict confidence were explained to the
participants before data collection began. Both research participants agreed to and signed a human-subjects informed consent form, a copy of which they retained.

3.5 Foresight: Preparing for interviews

Interview preliminaries

Preliminary aspects of interviewing to help facilitate productive interviews were managed keeping in mind the following five questions: *Who? When? Where? How long? Under what conditions?* (Richards, 2003). I began to consider suitable answers to these questions early on in the research, with many having to be clarified with individual participants as much in advance of a particular interview as possible (generally, 1-2 weeks before). Answers to these questions as they were by the end of the research study are summarized below.

*Who?* Participants in the research had completed all levels of English study at the IEP where I was working. I considered the effect of cultural background as well as gender on the study. Of four students who initially considered participating, two eventually agreed to take part in the research project, Riko and Rafael. A more complete academic profile of the participants is provided in the table below.
Table 3.5: Participant profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>TOEFL</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Future career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Riko</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>B.A. English</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafael</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>B.S. Natural Resources Science</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Instructor of environmental sciences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When? Global aspects of interview timing as well as local conditions needed to be considered (Richards, 2003). For global aspects, participants and I decided on minimally three interviews over the course of one semester: near the beginning, middle, and end of the fall semester. An informal discussion was scheduled with both participants at the beginning of the second semester to discuss biographical details. For local conditions, I needed to determine the times of day when participants would be most comfortable reflecting on their studies. In the end, Riko was generally available before her morning class and Rafael on weekends. Specific interview dates and times were confirmed with each participant at least one week in advance.

Where? Most interviews took place at the IEP facility where all participants had done their English studies, a convenient location near the main campus. An available classroom was confirmed before the interview with the academic coordinator at the school. Weekend meetings with Rafael were arranged in different locales, including a park setting and a quiet coffee shop.

How long? Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, with the collection of seven interviews totaling nearly six hours. Before each interview began, the interviewer made sure that
the expected length of the interview was acceptable, confirming with the participant any obligations they might have soon after the interview (class, family, studying, etc.).

Under what conditions? Audio recording was done using a hand-held Sony 2GB PX Series MP3 Digital voice IC recorder. Interviews were later transcribed, with transcripts of all interviews made available to the participants.

**Interview guides**

Interview guides help the interviewer prepare for a semi-structured interview by considering general directions the interview might take, rather than a specific line of inquiry. Use of an interview guide helps maintain an informal feel, and prevents the interviewer from asking a predetermined list of questions as in an oral questionnaire (Richards, 2003). Interview guides used for the purposes of the present study were prepared following some basic guidelines (ibid., p. 69):

- Before the interview, brainstorming what the interview might achieve
- Thinking about the central questions research might help answer
- Reflecting on what lines of inquiry those questions might lead to
- Considering different ways of beginning the interview (e.g., *How's everything going?*)

The interview guides for each set of interviews were loosely based on the following themes, themes that were decided upon from interview to interview:
**Interview set #1**: Academic background, expectations for U.S. university studies

**Interview set #2**: Inquiries related to emerging research questions

**Interview set #3**: Reflecting on the semester; Short- and long-term goals

### 3.6 Learning to listen: Interview structure

For most interviews, it was important to consider beforehand: how to elicit responses to questions while maintaining a conversational feel, what the goals of the interview might be, and different types of questions I might ask.

#### 3.6.1 Maintaining a conversation feel

Adding to the complexity of real time interviewing, the need to maintain a ‘conversational’ feel requires an attentive ear and a willingness to move beyond predicted topics (Richards, 2003), a skill necessary in order to highlight the interviewee’s agenda over the interviewer’s. A more relaxed interaction style in interviews was attempted by considering the effects of taking notes during interviews, as well as the wait time allowed after each question.

The effect of taking of notes during interviews had to be considered to balance the research agenda with the unforeseen turns of ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Burgess, 1984, as quoted in Richards, 2009). To maintain a conversation-like atmosphere, Richards (2003) suggests not
taking notes during interviews, since it adds “unnecessary formality to the proceedings, which might inhibit the informant and distract the interviewer” (p. 67).

For the first two sets of interviews, to keep track of impressions and questions to follow up on, notes were compiled only after each interview. To vary the interview format a little and to see for myself what Richards recommends, I took notes during the third, end-of-semester interview. At the time, I felt that the practice helped my overall understanding of the organization of the interview as well as my ability to follow up on individual points. When later I listened to the recorded interviews, however, it became apparent to me that the spontaneity of the interaction had decreased with a sense of increasing formality, and a number of opportunities for insightful questioning had been lost.

Considering the nature of some of the interview questions, I also needed to allow a certain wait time for students to mentally prepare an answer before responding (Thornbury, 1996). I followed advice for interviewers suggested by Spack (1997), using appropriate back-channeling to prompt participants to expand on their thoughts, e.g., ‘Uh-huh’, ‘I see’, questions to encourage further reflection on a topic, such as ‘What do you mean by that?’, giving supportive feedback (‘yes,’ ‘I see what you mean’), and by being conscious of my own responses to allow the interviewee the opportunity to develop their ideas without unintentionally guiding them with leading questions.
3.6.2 Interviewer goals for each interview

Three interviews were done with each participant: before the semester began, in the middle of the semester, and near the end. Topics that arose in each interview varied according to the participant, although some similarities did emerge. Questions for the initial interview initially focused on participants’ reasons for studying and their expectations for the upcoming semester, following suggestions made by Leki (2007) in her qualitative academic literacy research study.

Formats for later interviews tended to focus on more specific topics (e.g., coursework and impressions of classes). For the most part, participants described how they were feeling, responding to demands, and managing at that point of the semester. Not surprisingly, the major theme that arose in each of the second interviews predominantly concerned difficulties the participants were having, as well as reflections on the coping strategies they had been employing.

The third set of interviews (at the end of the semester) tended more towards positive reflections on learning objectives met, and goals for the near and distant future. To provide a general feel for different interviews, specific questions from each are included in the table below.
Table 3.6: Examples of questions from each interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>-Why have you decided to begin studying Psychology? [Riko]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Imagine the instructor’s point of view. Why did she give you this assignment? [Riko, Rafael]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-How do you feel about your studies, in general? [Riko]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-What learning objectives do you have in terms of the PhD program? [Rafael]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>-Your last exam. Tell me about what happened and how you feel. [Riko]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-How does the amount of work you’re putting in make you feel? [Rafael]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>-In what ways do you think your courses are helping you reach your goals? [Riko]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Tell me about the Writing class, what have the goals of the class been? [Riko]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-How have you managed? What have you done to deal with any difficulties? [Rafael]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.7 Data analysis: Notes on transcribing and analysis

The first step of analysis is to allow “categories to emerge naturally” (Richards, 2003, p. 192) by quickly reading through transcripts, noting down main themes, recurring words, and central ideas using descriptive words that first come to mind (e.g. ‘courses,’ ‘frustration,’ ‘goals’).

In order to “open up inquiry and move it towards interpretation” (Richards, 2003, p. 276), the ensuing process of analysis was broken down into three parts: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. One advantage of a multi-layered approach to analysis is that the researcher may more accurately arrive at the categories most naturally suggested by the data; a second
advantage is that through the recursive nature of this cyclical analysis, the researcher becomes intimately familiar with the interview data.

*Open coding* begins with a basic coding system (see Appendix). For the purpose of creating a system specific for this study, I started off with my reflections from the interviews, consulting notes I had made. Reading through each interview again allowed preliminary categories and conceptualizations to be identified and noted in the margins using the text comment function available on my word processor.

*Axial coding* includes relating the categories and looking for links between them (Richards, 2003). In this step, other categories began to emerge, as well as more specific sub-categories. These additional categories were then organized, grouped, and oriented towards the original research questions. New directions for analysis could then be considered, including the role of the participants’ majors, their socioacademic relations, their experience living in America, and how they managing to cope with stress.

*Selective coding* followed, a process in which the identified sub-categories were further refined to be grouped together under umbrella terms. After reflecting on all the possible categories suggested by the data in order to maintain sufficient coverage, I looked for natural means of grouping categories, considering notes from the interviews, observations of students working in similar conditions, and reading of relevant research made to date. Once these initial evaluations of categories were made, experimenting with different groupings was the necessary next step.
Three central concepts emerged: Academic literacy struggles (e.g., time limits on exams), strategies (e.g., talking with instructors), and goals (academic, professional, and personal).

Different techniques for the organizing and reorganizing of data can be simple, e.g., using markers, stiff paper, and floor space (Richards, 2003), or through the use of a computer program (such as *The Ethnograph Qualitative Data Analysis Software*, as done by Riazi, 1997). My own technique for grouping categories is closest to the former, an idea I discovered was much like assembling a puzzle (a comparison suggested by LeCompte & Schensul, 2010).

The puzzle-assembling technique I used was based on a simple plan: Once all transcripts had been coded, sections of the interviews were grouped together based on common themes (first-level rearrangement). These themes were then matched with the emerging structure of the study, providing for an organizational scheme that is parallel across all the narratives (Struggles, Strategies, Setting goals). Next, each of these themed sections was reorganized considering overall coherence (second-level rearrangement). An individual narrative was then begun starting from what each participant related, with guidance from insights gained from literature relevant to L2 academic literacy practices and research.

### 3.8 Characteristics of the present qualitative inquiry

Following Bogdan & Biklen (2007), the following four features characterize the qualitative inquiry of my study:
Descriptive data. One means of promoting the value of the hidden transcripts (Leki, 2001) the research participants shared is to provide them with a central platform from which their voices can be heard more clearly. To help in this, the account of the participants’ academic experiences is interwoven with quotations from the interviews, along with notes to establish context. Every attempt was made to scrutinize the transcripts and examine every utterance made. Through this work, the students’ own narratives emerged.

Concern with process. As interviews were scheduled to coincide with the beginning, middle, and end of the semester as closely as possible, a major part of this resulting narrative was how the research participants considered their academic and social positions in flux over time. As the majority of the interviews were either semi-structured (only general topics of interview established a priori) or open-ended (conversational style), the participants often discussed their regular activities both in and out of school, their studying procedures, and the different types of interactions they had day-to-day (with classmates, teachers, family members, friends, etc). More emphasis was placed on documenting these processes over the actual outcomes, i.e. products, of their work (exam scores, overall satisfaction with studies).

Inductive approach to data analysis. Qualitative inquiry relegates the formulation of research questions to after the data has been collected and analyzed. My initial inquiries were guided by questions that were very general in nature (e.g. What is second language writing? Who are the writers? How do students react to writing at the tertiary level? Do they manage?). Only after the
majority of the interviews had taken place and transcripts afterwards analyzed did more concrete questions and research directions begin to surface, including the more general approach of examining L2 writing within the context of advanced academic literacy acquisition.

*Focus on meaning.* The central idea of the present research is to hear students’ voices and to examine how two students understood their circumstances through one semester of study. However, a researcher may inadvertently introduce his/her own perspective into events described in interviews. After drafts of the analysis were made, informal discussions were carried out to help clarify the participants’ perspectives.

### 3.9 Regarding self-reported data

The role of first-person narratives in education research stems from the onset of self-interpretation as a necessary component of research in the human sciences, based in part on the ideas of social psychologist George Mead, scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, and cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner, who believed that a person’s self-interpretation, i.e. their developing sense of self as revealed in their own stories, provides the foundation for a narrative-centered research methodology in psychology, anthropology, sociology, and sociolinguistics (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000).

Certain caveats are necessary, however, in the documentation of first-person narratives. First, it is inevitable that participants select only the details relevant to their own perspectives of an event
(Leki, 2001), and, as such, Atkinson and Silverman (1997) warn, “We take at face value the image of the self-revealing speaking subject at our peril” (p. 322, as quoted in Richards, 2003). A similar position is taken up by Wolcott (1999), who believes that during informant interviewing, “What people tell us tends to reveal how they believe things should be” (p. 21), rather than as they necessarily are. Receiving information directly from a participant is considered less reliable, and therefore less valid as a means of scientific inquiry, than other forms of data gathering, including participant observation and resulting third-person narratives (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000).

Second, it is important to remember that an interview is constructed on the relationship between the people involved, viz. whether the interviewer is viewed as teacher or researcher has an impact on the data gathered. It is for these two reasons, then, that Richards (2003) suggests treating all interviews as accounts rather than as reports (p. 86), as interactional events between interviewer and interviewee, and that interview questions should be allowed to take on a central role in the analysis of data.

Third, the process of documenting lived experiences is never as true to the facts as the researcher would like, as discussed in Ramanathan & Atkinson (1999). Although a qualitative researcher makes every attempt to record events “faithfully” (p. 45), the process of relating the accounts to a specific discourse community must follow the writing standards of that community. As a result, the formal written narratives of the participants’ stories are “inevitably inaccurate and constructed” (p. 45). Bearing this in mind, the present thesis purposefully limits the extent of
theoretical analysis within each narrative with the intention of returning to this necessary groundwork in the Discussions section.

3.10 Conclusion and assumptions

As a conclusion to this Methodology section, certain assumptions of an educationally-based ethnographic research need to be made explicit (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). Doing so ideally dampens the effects of the caveats above described, and paves the way for the student narratives that follow.

(i) It is recognized that the “focused description” (p. 50) of small-scale ethnographic research limits its overall generalizability. The present thesis examines incidents and situations of two students perhaps applicable to a greater L2 student population, and salient issues will be discussed and cross-referenced with relevant research literature. However, further extension into “ethnographic comparability” (p. 49) across larger L2 student populations will be largely left up to readers;

(ii) The element of ‘culture’ predominant in the tradition of ethnography is often defined within educational research to be the larger school environment or the classroom. For the purposes of the present thesis, this view of ‘culture’ should be understood as an L2 university setting as well as the specific discourse communities the participants are actively attempting to engage in;
(i) As per the predominant goals of ethnographically-bound qualitative research (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999), the emphasis here has been to provide an *emic* (insider’s) view of events, what Leki (2001) refers to as the students’ *hidden transcripts*, i.e. their own version of events related to their first semester of study; and,

(ii) The problem orientation of the present thesis is apparent in the in-depth examination of the struggles the participants experienced in their first semester of regular university studies. I, like Leki (2001), did not set out “looking for problems” (p. 19), though I did find them. Such documentation is meant to be illustrative of these students’ current situations, providing space for reflection as well as for IEP and regular university pedagogical implications.
Chapter Four

Riko’s Narrative

“The course of study was difficult, but it was enjoyable” (Riko, Interview 1)

4.0 Riko: Literacy profile

The magic of words: Earlier experiences with writing

Riko began her U.S. undergraduate studies almost twenty years after completing her first B.A. degree in Japan in English literature. She recognized then the value of understanding the English language to communicate with others, even if her intentions at that time were to remain in Japan. Her studies included source textbooks written primarily in English with lectures all in Japanese. The focus of her studies was text-based, and students were required to read a large number of texts, including Shakespeare. Her written assignments were mainly English-medium, short summaries of texts the class had to read. Very little or no outside research was required. By her own account, the assignment formats were simpler (read and summarize) and less was generally expected of students than what she would experience 20 years later at the American IEP.

She remembers two sides to her feelings about reading and studying during those studies:

Interviewer: What did you enjoy about the program, about your entire university career then?

Riko: It was difficult for me to understand. But I was enjoying to study English. (Interview 1)
Difficult, yet enjoyable: Riko’s view of literacy and academic studies causing both positive and negative reactions may be related to an experience from her early grade-school days when she wrote a personal reflection about her mother as a class assignment. The teacher would later read her composition to the whole class, with Riko’s mother present.

Riko wrote about her feelings from that day: “On the one hand I was glad and proud of myself. But on the other hand, it made me a little embarrassed, because I did not tell such things to my mother directly. However, in reality, my mother was very pleased. At that time, I realized that writing has a power to move people, and I had an interest to know the magic of words” (Literacy Autobiography).

In grade school, at her Japanese university, and until this day, Riko recognizes the power of literacy, and is motivated by this. Understanding the value of words and of studying has provided her with a necessary foundational attitude for her approach to scholarly work, work that in the first semester of studies at a U.S. university she would find extremely challenging.

These episodes begin to reveal a little about Riko and how she would later fare at the beginning of her studies in the U.S. Despite the academic rigor of her courses, her still-developing English skills, and a number of personal issues, she managed to maintain a positive, confident outlook. Recognizing what skills she needed to improve while nevertheless enjoying the process of learning was for her a very natural attitude. Her confidence in herself in spite of the difficulties she faced is one of her truly remarkable personality traits:
Riko: So still I’ve been struggling, but I feel I can make it. And, if I will take time, I will (+) have the confidence to get over this stage, and then my feel will be much better. (Interview 2)

In the next section, specific struggles Riko recalled in interviews are described. Her experiences must have been overwhelming at times, at least initially. If the interviews had been video recorded, however, only a confident woman discussing her experiences with strength and courage would be visible.

4.1 Struggles

Studying at an Intensive English Program (IEP)

Twenty years after completing her B.A. studies in Japan, Riko began studies at a pre-university intensive English program in the U.S., where she would study for more than a year, taking two intermediate-level courses, the most advanced level twice, and two business English courses.

The writing she did at the IEP intermediate and advanced levels was mainly summaries of reading, which she was familiar with from her earlier studies, as well as timed readings on more personal topics (e.g., Write about a future dream). She also became familiar with other genres in which other organizational schemes were applied, such as comparison, exposition, and persuasive compositions, an experience for which certain skills were needed:

Riko: I needed to have a skill to express my mind or my idea, and I also had to convince people why my idea was important. (Interview 1)
At this stage of her academic literacy development, Riko began to apply knowledge-transforming writing skills (expressing her own ideas, providing support for her thoughts) over the knowledge-telling skills (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) required in summaries. Developing these skills at the IEP represented initial steps in her progress towards becoming a proficient academic writer.

Writing in the business English program stretched her abilities even further. Her writing assignments, including a research paper, required advanced writing techniques as well as other academic skills.

**Interviewer:** What did you need to do for that assignment?

**Riko:** To get appropriate information using the university’s database, or internet. So, what kind of information will be needed, and more useful to my research paper. So to pick up appropriate article and information, that also was very important. (Interview 1)

When asked about the benefit of this type of task, she identified the following:

**Riko:** I think to analyze deeply and to understand the topics, and what is the requirement for these assignments. So I needed to think and also to organize a research paper. After researching information, how should I put these information to appropriate part. (Interview 1)

Riko was able to see the value in these more advanced writing assignments, in contrast with her perceptions of her academic writing 20 years earlier. Now, she is able to identify more precisely what she had learned since she began at the IEP.

**Interviewer:** What’s your general feeling about all the writing you’ve done?

**Riko:** Compared with last summer, I feel my writing is more natural, to be more organized. I think I can get used to writing in the American style and the academic writing style. So that’s the big difference. (Interview 1)
Besides her writing skills having developed, she also realized that her attitude about writing had changed, a necessary step in the development of advanced literacy skills.

Riko: Before, to be honest with you, I disliked the writing. I didn’t know how to summarize, how to write, which word should I use. Still, I have some grammar mistake or spelling mistake. But, I like writing right now. (Interview 2)

Long-term struggles with texts

Riko identified one specific, long-term challenge about reading and writing in English to be her tendency to think in Japanese and have to translate into English.

Riko: Because I’m Japanese, sometimes I think the Japanese, in my brain, then I transfer from Japanese into English, then I write it down. So, my English looks like Japanese-English writing. So to the native speaker it sometimes look a little bit strange. (Interview 2)

In the second, middle-of-the-semester interview, she had the same impression:

Riko: My brain still kind of works Japanese function, and my knowledge or understanding and memory was input in Japanese before, so how can I connect the old information and the new information, which are different languages? So, that’s the problem. (Interview 2)

She feared that her academic literacy skills had not yet developed enough to be successful in her undergraduate course work.

Riko: To write my thought in English as I get used to it, to understand the texts written in English, my level is not enough, especially the academic level at the university. (Interview 2)

Overall, a handful of central themes began to emerge from her reactions to and perceptions of English studies at the IEP, including:
• Increasing exposure to different writing styles at the IEP
• Moving beyond summarizing texts to self-expression and responding to texts (research)
• Concerns about writing in a non-native style
• Uncertainty about her academic language skills being adequate for undergraduate work

As the semester progressed, her perceptions on these matters evolved, and she ended the semester with much more confidence. How this change came about in the fifteen weeks of her first semester is described in the following sections.

**Writing during her first undergraduate semester**

One month before the beginning of her first regular university semester, Riko found herself quite anxious. She realized that the first semester was going to be tough with a full course load of general education courses. At this point, she was largely unaware of what was to be expected of her in terms of course work and tests.

**Interviewer:** What do you expect to write in those classes? What kind of writing assignments?

**Riko:** Maybe I will be required to write summaries after reading, and also research paper which is similar as what I’ve done at the IEP. (Interview 1)

As it would turn out, her prediction would not be too far astray. However, she would also take eight full-length exams, complete readings from three undergraduate textbooks, and write 7-8 short and long written compositions.
In the table below, a summary of the writing and reading Riko did during her first semester as an undergraduate student is compiled.

Table 4.1: Description of first-semester, undergraduate course work, Riko

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Critical review of published experiments OR participation in experiments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Psychology</td>
<td>textbook</td>
<td>Four multiple-choice unit exams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to Physical</td>
<td>textbook</td>
<td>Three exams (multiple choice, matching, true/false, and short answer questions)</td>
<td>Content of exams derived from the reading and the lectures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>20-30 pages weekly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-year Writing and Rhetoric</td>
<td>Writing and Rhetoric’s course book on writing</td>
<td>Short (1-2 page) assignments</td>
<td>Literacy biography, political text analysis, summaries of research, multiple student-teacher conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Includes models of texts written by both NES and NNES students</td>
<td>Midterm exam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rhetorical analysis essay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology (dropped)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Research project (proposal, annotated bibliography, essay)</td>
<td>Two persuasive texts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading for general education courses

Riko ascribed the struggles with the texts she had to read to the more advanced style in which they were written. She had the impression the texts were not written in a straight-forward fashion, especially apparent to her in Sociology:
Riko: That class gave us lots of reading assignments. Even I read, but the details are not clear, not like kind of a newspaper or a magazine, or not like mathematics, you know, $1 + 1 = 2$, that’s very clear. (Interview 2)

Overall, Riko was feeling “stressed and overwhelmed,” feelings that were compounded by struggles she was also experiencing with exams, her feelings about becoming a member of a social environment, and personal issues related to family and friends, issues that she discusses in the following sections.

**Exam taking: Impaired performance**

When it came to her first exams at the undergraduate level, Riko began to have more and more difficulties, increasing the level of challenge she encountered and, along with this, certain degrees of stress and nervousness, which she reflected on in the middle of the semester:

Riko: So I have been struggling to settle down as a student, on the exam day I am very nervous. And my main problem it’s hard for me to understand the comprehensive English language ... but sometimes I pick the wrong answer and I can’t understand exactly the meaning of the questions. (Interview 2)

She expressed the belief that the difficulty was the result of a different exam style from what she was used to. The format of multiple-choice tests boggled her, largely due to how much of it seemed to be testing students’ knowledge of synonymous words.

Riko: The meaning, and also the multiple-choice exam, so some questions use different words from the lecture, and a little bit twisted, so right now to remember the definition and the meaning in English is too much for me already. But, if she will use the same meaning but different words, it makes me a little bit confused. (Interview 2)
The beginning of the freshman year is typically hard for all students. Riko, as a student used to receiving top grades, would get hit hard by the outcome of the first exam in Sociology. She wondered after the exam how she had done compared to the others. Her result was disappointing.

Riko: The first exam was the worst score in the class. (Interview 2)

Over time, she began to learn ways to describe her reactions to these challenges and to make sense of them. She related her difficulties with exams to impaired performance, a term which she had learned in her Psychology course work. Impaired performance, she explained, applies to the student who understands the material well by herself, but is not be able to demonstrate this knowledge under pressure.

Riko: Psychology class is very huge, over 300 students. Usually, middle of the exam, many students have already finished. So, they go to the teacher’s desk and submit their answer sheet, so I felt, I had pressure, I had to rush to finish. So, I was not able to focus on the exam. (Interview 3)

To summarize Riko’s reaction to testing, she considered the most challenging aspects of the examinations she had taken the first semester to be:

- Amount of content knowledge to learn
- Unfamiliar multiple-choice format
- Academic vocabulary (using words she thought were only meant to trip students up)
- Feeling she did not entirely understand the questions
- Impaired performance, caused in part by other students finishing before her
Composing processes: “To organize my paper is also to organize my thinking”

Riko knew the value of a writing process in the composition of academic texts. Of all considerations for writing, her composing process seemed to be the area she had the least difficulties with, as evidenced by the ease with which she articulated her thoughts on it. The clear understanding of and appreciation for her writing process she claimed to have learned by herself while writing; the ease with which she described the process, however, might arguably reflect a learning outcome from her earlier university studies as well as from the IEP.

Her self-described process of writing as applied to one larger writing assignment at the IEP immediately prior to the beginning of undergraduate studies was

- Identify personally relevant topics: “[The assignment] started just since yesterday. Last night I was thinking, what should I write about. What topic I’m interested in.” (Interview 2)
- Begin to gather information about this topic: “I need to research, so I will access the library database. I need to find reliable resources.” (Interview 2)
- Consider audience and organization: “And, who will be the readers, and why this topic is very important. Why do I need to write this topic in the paper? How can I convince to people, that I’ve learned. Also, organize my thinking.” (Interview 2)
- Allow sufficient time for each step
- Consult with teacher for feedback to help in final revisions
She explained that she had learned her writing process through trial-and-error. She started thinking about writing tasks the night they were assigned, immediately considering which resources might help convince her intended audience. Organizational concerns for her appeared to be automatic, at least when asked to describe them:

Riko: I need to organize how to start, the introduction part, and how should I write to convince the reader, to help understand my paper, so introduction, background about this topic, and body and conclusion. (Interview 2)

Reading into Riko’s meticulous nature and attention to detail seems to be easy when we consider how she views organization in general:

Riko: To organize my paper is also to organize my thinking. That’s how I learn. (Interview 2)

**Becoming a member of an academic community**

Becoming a member of an academic community represented for Riko one of the most important aspects of her studies, for doing so was essential to meet the short-term demands of her university studies and the long-term goals she had set to be a social worker. Writing for social workers is described in Leki (2007) as a “process of professionalization” (p. 200), which Riko in the first semester of her studies knew required

- Talking with professors
- Getting involved with the community through assignments
- Acquiring cultural background knowledge, and
- Learning the role of group work in academic development
Talking with professors and TAs

Riko had various difficulties making contact with her professors. She realized that in large classes, meeting with professors one-on-one might not always be possible and the next best option is to meet with a teaching assistant. Her experience meeting with a TA for her Psychology class did not meet with the hoped-for results:

Riko: It was helpful but,... (Interview 2)

Without elaborating her point about how the meeting had been unhelpful, she instead assumed responsibility herself for not being able to come up with a strategy for future exams. She had not yet resolved how to manage her unfamiliarity with exam formats and her struggles with academic vocabulary.

Riko did not feel very comfortable asking questions within her weekly recitation groups. It would take half the semester to develop a working relationship with the TA assigned to her group and to realize that getting in touch with the professor directly by email could help her find a solution to her test-taking woes. These issues and other strategies she employed successfully will be addressed in upcoming sections.

Cultural background knowledge

Many international students realize that a lack of cultural background knowledge has a significant impact on the understanding of lectures, readings, and classroom interactions, an
issue elaborated on in Spack’s (1997) case study. What an American student might take for
granted, e.g., a teacher’s sense of humor, references to historical events and people, word
connotations, and the knowledge of values inherent in U.S. society, are not always so transparent
to non-native speakers. Riko herself expressed one specific concern about cultural background
knowledge, related to the topic of sexuality as it was discussed in her introductory Sociology
class:

Riko: I don’t know American society, or how the American people feel about homosexual or
heterosexual people, so I don’t have the basic feeling or the basic knowledge. I was
born and I was grown up in Japan, so my brain still works, still I feel I am a different
race, different cultures sometimes interrupt my studying. Yeah. (Interview 2)

Other topics the class explored included sexual identities, the global sex trade, and other topics
that many undergraduate students like her might be very interested in developing a better
understanding of. Although she originally thought the class would be extremely helpful for her
future social work and she worked hard to keep up with the reading that she described as
“unclear,” either the topics or her more reserved nature persuaded her that the course was not for
her. By the fourth week of the semester, and as a combined result of her low test performance,
the difficult readings, and a perceived lack of cultural knowledge, she had decided it would be
better to focus on her other classes and drop Sociology.

**Personal struggles**

In terms of personal struggles, recent developments in Riko’s life influenced her and ultimately
her decisions to begin studies to become a social worker. Having gone through what she called a
“nasty” divorce due in part to domestic violence led her to consider two issues:
i) How to help the community in a way community organizations had helped her, and,

ii) How to take care of her 4-year old son

Community organizations such as SafeHouse and the Emergency Family Assistance Association had helped her immensely over two years. The care and support of these U.S. social workers served as an inspiration, providing her and her son not only with food, shelter, and counseling, but also with a plan for the future.

Riko: To help people is great. Then I really wanted to change my pain in past to power in the future. (Interview 1)

Riko figured she would need between two and four years to complete her degree work and become a social worker depending on different factors, the most important of which was her young son.

Riko: The first year I need to adjust my new life, to study at the university, and also to take care of my 4-years old son. So, that’s my first challenge. (Interview 1)

Her ability to balance family obligations with academic demands at hand would determine her ultimate level of success in the first semester.

**Multi-tasking**

Within the context of the difficulties she was experiencing, Riko required individual strategies to manage different struggles. She proved capable of handling each situation that came up in effective ways, though her resolve was often put to the test.
As an example of the challenges she needed to deal with in these regards, the beginning of the semester and significant events in her family coincided:

Riko: I became a CU student, and also received 50% child custody. So my son back to my life again. Almost the same timing. (Interview 3)

Dedicating significant time to her studies while taking care of her son was not easy, especially considering how his feelings affected her feelings, and vice versa.

Riko: I must be healthy, happy, and I must enjoy the college life, for me and for my son as well. If I will be irritated, or if I have stress, this will influence to my son. (Interview 2)

As a result of being a full-time student and mother, she did not have any time for friends, nor were other family members present to help her. The need to multi-task and to fulfill the roles of single mother and full-time student overwhelmed her at times. Her experience of ‘stress’ was much like ideas that had been discussed in her Psychology course:

Riko: The stress or overwhelming is like a spiral world. (Interview 2)

What Riko went through at these times would very well affect any student, any person. Add on to this the fact that Riko’s first language is not English and we can begin to imagine how much strain she was under through the semester. Riko realized by the middle of the semester that if she were to succeed, she had to start taking things into her own hands and develop working strategies to improve her scholarly performance, decrease her overall anxieties, and continue to take care of her family.
Towards the middle of the semester, Riko wrote for her freshman composition class an essay on multi-tasking and its effects on the individual. In the essay, she discusses three keys of success for a multi-tasker: “If people wish to have productive, effective, and stress-free lives using the technique of multitasking, they need to…”

i) get used to being in the new environment first,

ii) then, select prioritized, organized, and manageable tasks, and

iii) be healthy and single-minded.

By this account, Riko turned out to be a fine multi-tasker and began to perform productively, effectively, and more stress-free. She demonstrated time and time again her proficiency in selecting manageable tasks, her abilities in adapting to the new undergraduate environment, and her resolve in maintaining her health and goal orientation. To pull this off, she made use of an assortment of strategies, some that came natural to her and others that she picked up in her earlier studies. By the end of the semester, her selection of strategies paid off, and she received high marks in all of her courses.

4.2 Strategies

Metacognitive strategies

Metacognition refers to the tendency of reflecting on the nature of cognitive activity while considering different ways to apply this reflection to the learning process (Cornoldi, 2010).
Metacognitive strategies are integral to the initial stages of the problem-solving cycle, a cycle that involves planning for learning, directed attention to a learning task, selective attention, self-management, self-monitoring, problem identification, and self-evaluation of progress (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). Riko’s advanced sense of metacognition, her so-called intellectual self-esteem, was reflected in her regular and effective use of metacognitive strategies throughout the semester.

*Planning for learning: Setting long-term goals*

Riko’s plan for learning began as a result of her personal struggles with divorce and domestic violence, circumstances that brought her into contact with U.S. community services that inspired her to become a social worker herself.

Riko: For my second life, or for being independent woman, so, and then, my mind was changed. To help people is great. Then I really wanted to change my pain in past to power in the future. So, that's the main reason why I want to be a social worker. (Interview 1)

Upon this realization, Riko began to consider how an undergraduate degree in Psychology would help her achieve this, since specific course work in Social Work was not available at the local university. Preparing for this required her directed attention to her English language skills, which she needed to improve in order to enter and successfully complete her planned course of study. One year previous to her planned enrollment at the university, she began her intensive language studies at the IEP, amidst her legal battles and the personal turmoil she was experiencing.
Riko routinely planned for her learning in the course of her life and in her studies, and managed other metacognitive strategies to monitor the success of her goal orientation, as will now be shown.

Directed attention: Setting short-term goals

Her plan to study at the university forced Riko to consider how she might improve her English language skills. Planning for the future comes second nature to Riko. By the time she had made up her mind to work towards a degree in Psychology, she already had begun to plan how to proceed. Becoming a student at the university’s IEP language program would ultimately improve her family’s well-being. Her timeframe included one-year of English language studies before she applied to the university.

Selective attention: Immediate writing needs

Her attention centered, she began to make a plan how to get the most possible out of her studies at the IEP, paying attention to which areas of her language skills she most needed to improve, as well as the academic skills that would help her get into and through her university studies.

The course work Riko selected to study at the IEP helped her achieve these short-term learning goals. She entered English language studies at the intermediate level, soon moved on to advanced English, took a TOEFL preparation course, and then moved on to Business English courses.
Riko recognized that some skills and courses at the IEP would be more valuable than others. She was especially concerned about her writing skills development. To help her in this, she identified the writing skills practiced at the advanced level to be the most beneficial for her. The writing course emphasized community-service projects in which interaction with local business leaders was necessary. She took this course twice.

Having exhausted the regular curriculum, and with 15 weeks before the beginning of her undergraduate studies, she applied for and received a scholarship to continue studying at the IEP in their business English curriculum. The business English courses she considered especially effective, for at this level advanced academic writing skills were emphasized, including how to do research, and write a formal research paper. She described this assignment in her first interview:

Riko: So that’s a quite a big, the biggest assignment in my life. So that’s the first challenge for me. (Interview 1)

Self-management: Personalized approach to learning

Getting through challenging assignments like a long research paper was helped by Riko’s understanding of the writing composition process, as discussed earlier. Organization of thought leads to organization of actions, a dictum that could well encapsulate Riko’s approach to challenging situations. Organization for Riko represents the conditions by which learning happens, through self-management of the learning environment.
Besides her organized approach to difficult situations, Riko made use of at least one other strategy to help create the conditions that ease learning: personalizing the topics of study that she needed to engage in. She describes how she managed this for one service project which required her to investigate a local, community issue:

Riko: I have been interested in fashion and clothing for a long time. But, when I came to the U.S. I saw recycling banks, or boxes, in front of different stores, then I started to have interest. I thought, what are they doing with the clothing, where is it going? So, that’s a very simple question, but I wanted to research about that my question. And then, when I stopped by one recycled clothing shop, I had a chance to talk with a manager. (Interview 1)

Self-monitoring: Checking progress

After getting started in her undergraduate studies, Riko’s use of planning, self-management, and self-monitoring strategies were put to the test. Monitoring, the self-checking of one’s performance in a learning situation, helps students compare their own impressions about the quality of their work with the formal evaluations done by instructors.

Riko had disappointing test results through much of the semester, and her resolve to do well subsequently increased. Low test scores force a student to consider how to improve. One step in doing this is to identify problems with the current course of action.

Problem identification

Identifying problems in the middle of a semester is a complex task. Besides the course content she needed to master, the academic vocabulary, the confusing multiple-choice exams, and her numerous assignments, Riko recognized her weakened confidence as a great obstacle. The extent
of the material she had to learn made her nervous, as well as the thought that she might not be able to demonstrate her knowledge of it. However, the identification of her low confidence as a significant limitation to her success prompted her to formulate a vast array of cognitive strategies to help her cope with immediate academic demands. Once she had monitored her own progress and identified which problems she was having, these cognitive strategies could then be put into action.

**Cognitive strategies**

The curricular framework of an IEP program is generally based on two distinct sets of learning objectives, i) acquiring the academic English language skills that will help L2 students interact appropriately in a university environment, and ii) practicing the academic skills needed for higher education studies. Many of the skills in this latter group are referred to as *cognitive strategies*, what O’Malley & Chamot (1990) define as “strategies that students use interacting with the material to be learned, manipulating the material mentally or physically, or applying a specific technique to the learning task” (p. 138). Skills commonly taught in pre-university programs to prepare students for academic readiness include how to use resources, take notes, summarize texts, make inferences, and improve study habits.

Examples of *cognitive strategies* Riko used to help cope with specific challenges of academic studies are discussed in this section.

*Use of model texts*
Model texts in writing are used to demonstrate the appropriate format and style of a specific written genre, raising awareness of the social conventions that writers follow to achieve their purposes in writing (Hyland, 2003). The use of models in L2 writing has been widely discussed in research studies, particularly in terms of the balance that instructors must strive for in providing too much structure versus none at all (Leki, 1995).

As the IEP program where Riko studied bases its writing instruction on a focus on genre, she was familiar with the advantages of using model texts:

Riko: The teacher showed us the example letter, sample letters, or the presentation or final research paper which were made by the students of last summer. Those samples gave me ideas and also helped me a lot. (Interview 1)

In her freshman composition class, a bridge class intended primarily for second language writers, Riko noted how the course textbook included many such models.

Riko: We have two books for the Writing class, so that’s one of two books includes many essays written by college students in the United States. So, they are selected, and their essay were very interesting. Because a college student wrote those essays. (Interview 3)

Looking at model texts both formulated specifically for classroom teaching purposes as well as student responses to the same assignment proved to be beneficial for Riko. She identified this strategy as one of the most important she had learned because it helped her understand what was to be later expected in her own writing.

Interviewer: In your Writing class and for writing in general, what have been the greatest things you’ve learned?
Riko: I learned kind of strategy or style of writing (+) and also useful phrases, useful words and/or (+) kind of content of the essay. But it’s hard for us to have image how, or, so that part, the reading is very useful. To read the text or essay written by others. That’s very useful. (Interview 3)

However common the use of model texts may be in second language writing classes, similar models are not always available writing across the curriculum. When asked if she expected to have access to model texts for those assignments, she realized she might have to make her own efforts to find some. She came up with two places where to look:

Riko: Yeah, I don’t know. I have no idea. But, because it will be my first experience to go to the university in the U.S., so everything will be new. But, maybe I will ask another classmate or to visit professors and to get advice ... Maybe I will visit the library, they have example, or research paper which was written by students before. [long pause] I don’t know. (Interview 1)

Studying

Riko may be characterized by her study habits and how they helped her manage specific difficulties: her low confidence and the academic vocabulary she had to learn.

Riko’s first response to the challenges of undergraduate course work was to begin a routine of daily studying, a cognitive strategy that O’Malley & Chamot (1990) classify under the principle of repetition.

Riko: I think one solution is to just prepare and to study everyday to increase my confidence and get ready for the exam. That’s my solution. But I’m not sure what kind of score I can get. That’s my concern. (Interview 2)
Reading the articles and checking her notes helped her increase her confidence. She also had to learning the new, technical vocabulary of her field, for which she used flash cards, what Riko calls *memory cards*:

Riko: The first exam of Psychology I was checking my class notes only and I read the article. My score was not good. From the second exam, I started to use strategy, to use memory cards. That helped me a lot. (Interview 3)

*Repetition* through a routine of studying and reinforcement of vocabulary knowledge using flash cards is, according to Oxford (1990), a strategy that benefits students as a way of creating mental linkages (a memory strategy), as a reflection of arranging and planning learning (a metacognitive strategy), and a means of lowering anxiety (an affective strategy). A perceived effect of the application of *repetition* strategies is to increase recognition of central concepts and words under timed circumstances, as in the eight exams that Riko had to take during this semester. Her improved scores on these as the semester progressed reflects the nature of the exams as evaluations of students’ familiarity with central ideas, and how beneficial a routine of studying can be for students in this type of course work.

*Taking (lots of) exams*

Riko was overwhelmed by the difficulty and the number of exams she had to take, especially in the first half of the semester before she had managed to develop working strategies for the amount of new content she needed to learn. She took every opportunity available to overcome the low grades she had received, including taking advantage of a class policy that of five exams, the lowest grade would be dropped. However, this meant she would have to take the optional
fifth exam, an exam that was scheduled on the same day as the final for the course. As she
discussed this near the end of the semester, this did not seem to faze her.

Riko: I will take the five exams, it means two more exams left.
Interviewer: In the same week?
Riko: Same day. Yeah. So the last exam is only the stress and health chapter. The
optional exam covered whole everything during the semester. So, a lot.
(Interview 3)

Social and affective strategies

Social and affective strategies involve interaction with other people to assist with the learning
event. Typical strategies of this type include cooperation with other people (teachers, advisors,
peers), self-talk (mental techniques for lowering stress), and self-reinforcement (personal

Cooperation

As the first example of Riko’s use of social and affective strategies, Riko opted for her first-year
writing course to be specifically for ESL students, a class she found similar in format to courses
she had taken at the IEP.

Riko: So that’s called the First-year Writing class, and then the class is very international.
Then that class I have the confidence and I feel very comfortable to take that class.
Completely different feeling from the other classes. (Interview 2)

The format of this ESL composition class was familiar to her, including the use of group work to
read and react to one another’s writing.
Riko: So, I have been studying this Writing class, I’ve learned how we can understand others’ opinion which different from my own opinion ... I’ve had a lot of new knowledge from reading the other students’ papers. And to have a discussion. (Interview 2)

Beyond the comfort of being in a class of international students, Riko also needed to seek the help of her professors and her academic advisor, people with whom she began to exchange emails and meet regularly.

For her Anthropology class, meeting with the professor one-to-one turned out to be extremely beneficial.

Riko: The Anthropology exams, the first exam was terrible but the second exam the professor offered me to have a kind of follow-up session for me. So, one-to-one session, he just kind of summarized all his lectures. (Interview 2)

After her disastrous first exam in Psychology, which she attributed in part due to the large number of students finishing before her, she expressed her concern to her professor by email. The result was promising.

Riko: So, I told my feeling to the professor by email, and she offered me, You can take the exam at my office. That was very useful. My feeling was calm, not nervous. So, each kind of question, I read very carefully, then the correct answer came out of my brain. (Interview 3)

At the beginning of the semester, Riko had been skeptical about how her professors could help her. Riko’s confidence, assertiveness, and knowledge of academic vocabulary had grown as the semester moved on. Speaking with her international peers in writing class, writing emails to her professors, and talking with her TA had become routine practices for her.
Self-talk: “Gradually I get used to be as a student”

One social and affective strategy that helped Riko through the semester was self-talk, using mental techniques to reduce anxiety to be better able to carry out the tasks at hand (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). For Riko, this involved at least three specific components: maintaining enthusiasm, meditation, and engaging on a personal level with the topics in her courses.

Riko’s approach was to maintain enthusiasm about different assignments balanced with her characteristic attention-to-detail.

Riko: I’m exciting, I’m excited to write this paper, but the topic is very sensitive, so I need to be careful to, how should I explain my opinion. (Interview 2)

A strategy that kept her excited about the Psychology course work was noticing how immediately relevant the topics discussed in class were to her family life. Engaging with the topics on a personal level improved her understanding of psychology, and of her son’s behavior. She began to notice that recognizing this overlap between real-life and studies could ultimately help her shape her own behaviors:

Riko: When I discipline my son, the Psychology class helps me a lot ... before I just thought, son, why did you just do this, just I got angry. Right now I don’t get angry to him, because I can think, why did he do this, or behind his behavior, what was his message to me. That’s kind of the thinking that I have now, that behavior is kind of a message from the person. (Interview 2)

The application of the cognitive strategy of academic elaboration (applying material learned in academic contexts to real-world situations) intertwined with the affective strategy of self-reinforcement (personal motivation gained by realizing the value of learning) had helped her to take better control of studies and of family life, leading to a certain cognitive ease by the end of
the semester. She took her challenges in stride and with a calm composure by focusing, relaxing, and organizing.

Riko: We need to (+) prioritize and scheduling, or organize. This is my key-point, sometime I try meditation. So, try me mind clear, then back to studying. That works. (Interview 2)

This and her knack of being able to multi-task helped her to become familiar with her family and study routine, allowing her to take control of them rather than being controlled.

Riko: I think before to (+) handle the things more than one, people need to get used to do each task. Otherwise, when people have to juggle a few tasks at the same time, they don’t work. Each task must be familiar for me, and then I can start. (Interview 3)

Self-reinforcement

Riko had undergone a change in attitude about learning and writing. As the semester progressed, improvement in her performance happened through the application of the strategies she had devised. Her improvement on exams, for example, was remarkable. For Anthropology, by her third exam,

Riko: My score became almost double. (Interview 2)

And, for Psychology,

Riko: Third exam of Psychology was 86 points, from 64 [on the previous exam]

Noticing how overcoming stress and low confidence was possible with a combination of a regular study schedule, talking with instructors, and organizing her new life as a student had helped her better reach her academic goals, which in turn brought her closer to her personal goal
of building the confidence needed for further academic challenges. The interaction of these and other academic and personal goals is looked at more closely in the following section.

4.3 Goals

Asked about what she expected to learn in her undergraduate studies, Riko expressed a keen desire to improve all of her language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). She began to express a sense that while living and working in the U.S. would help her proficiency in these skills, improvement in writing was largely the domain of formal education. As such, she recognized this as one of the primary goals of her U.S. university education:

Riko: I want to write more academic style writing. I want to write. (Interview 1)

The importance of writing as a social worker became clear to her through a personal experience, an experience that again demonstrated to her the power of words, how writing could serve as an effective way of helping others.

Riko: Writing is a necessary skill for social worker, I think, because sometimes a social worker is required to write a recommendation letter, to the people, and to convince somebody or an organization how much this person is valuable. Also I received a very nice recommendation letter before, so I think writing skill is very important in my future. (Interview 1)

Many intermediary goals lay between Riko’s present studies and her future career. First, she needed to make sense of what it meant to be a social worker. Second, she had to clarify which language learning goals were needed for her present studies and her future career. Third, she realized her personal goals related to family were still primary, and that feelings about her learning process would be reflected in the relationship with her son.
Professional goals related to academic goals

Riko’s description of her studies in Psychology and her future career as a social work in many ways mirror the goals of the present thesis: the need to make sense of L2 students’ experiences.

Interviewer: Continuing to think of you in your future social work, how are your classes helping you achieve this?

Riko: So right now I’m studying Psychology disorders, for mental illness. For example, isolation from society, or maybe people get divorced and then depression, so we need to understand the background, what’s the main reason of this disease, or where this person feeling came from. We shouldn’t focus on just the problem in front of the person, we need to understand the issue under the water. (Interview 2)

Looking ‘under the water’ to begin to make sense of what is happening on the surface correlates with the first goal of this thesis to investigate L2 students’ hidden transcripts (Leki, 2001), what Riko calls here the ‘background’ of the situation. She recommends not focusing on the surface issues (e.g., not having done well on an exam), but rather what may have caused that situation (e.g., in her case, unfamiliar multiple-choice formats, other students finishing before her, knowledge of academic vocabulary being assessed as well as central concepts of the course, and needing more individualized attention).

Language learning goals

Riko’s decision to stay in the U.S. will require her to focus on three different goals simultaneously: her academic aspirations, being able to provide for her family, and her professional plans. She recognizes that one of the most significant steps towards achieving these will be to master her English language skills:
Riko: To work and to live in the United States the rest of my life, to speak English fluently and to have conversation with native speakers and also business conversations or regular conversations even with professors, my goal is to speak English as almost the same level as Japanese my level. (Interview 1)

Achieving advanced academic literacy will continue to challenge her as she continues studying. Important steps have been taken, however, in this her first semester, including:

- Recognizing the value of the academic skills carried over from her undergraduate studies and her time at the IEP and how they will continue to support her academic development, primarily in terms of study habits;
- Applying these study habits consistently should provide her with the means needed to master the familiarity of content knowledge assessed on assignments and exams;
- Interacting with instructors at U.S. universities can be extremely beneficial and helps build confidence to continue doing so;
- Multi-tasking is challenging at first, and later becomes more natural; and,
- Integrating the effects of all the above (academic skills, content knowledge, academic relationships, and time management) provides for a measure of cognitive ease, the ability to achieve difficult tasks with much less effort than previously.

Family

Riko exhibits a clear sense of direction when it comes to her academic studies, and entering into a state of flow in relation to these challenges should be easy for her. Presenting a plan for action as she did multiple times in the interviews and later following up on them had already resulted in
various degrees of success. Riko understands that continuing to meet up with her challenges in
subsequent semesters will result in further happiness, both for herself and her son:

Riko: I expect my lifestyle will be very good. So, I feel good, no stress, I can focus on the
studying, I hope I will be able to get the better grade. Then, I will be able to spend
the time much more with my son, and his feelings will be better. He will feel secure
and happy and he makes me happy, and that’s start a good circle. (Interview 3)

Relation of affect to goals

Riko earlier had identified ‘stress’ to be like a spiral leading nowhere. By the end of the semester,
she had noticed how a more productive circling effect, a circle that moves from her feelings to
her son’s feelings, and back again, was possible through the reduction of stress. Although
reducing stress is not always easy, Riko rediscovered her strengths in being able to do so. The
first steps in this is to recognize the causes of certain feelings, accept the challenges of new
demands, and to move from there:

Riko: To achieve my goal to be a social worker I must go through studying and a new
experience. To have a new experience always makes me nervous. But, also I need to
enjoy that new experience and because I know that after the challenging, I can be, I
can grow much more than before. (Interview 1)
4.4 Conclusion

In the above quote, Riko provides a simple framework for the present thesis, interrelating struggles, strategies, and setting goals:

**Goal**: be a social worker  
**Struggle**: studying, a new experience  
**Struggle**: new experiences cause nervousness  
**Strategy**: enjoy the novelty of the experience  
**Strategy**: remember that challenges precede the reaching of a goal  
**Goal**: personal growth

Riko stands out as a student who knows how to take charge of her learning environment in order to get the most out of it. The decisions she had to make include her study direction, the courses to take, where to find enough time to do well in these, how to find a balance between school and her family responsibilities, while tending all the while to her personal state-of-mind. One of the central factors in determining her success in these matters concerns whether or not the strategies she adopted were appropriate and effective for each situation, strategies ranging from how to more effectively learn content matter in a second language to how to maintain clarity of mind and focused purpose. She took care in managing the relations with her instructors, determining in which capacity each could help her better reach her academic goals. Her semester in the end was challenging and enjoyable, achieving a delicate balance of difficult tasks, the application of old and new strategies, and her continuous reexamination of the values of the personal, academic, and professional goals she had set in order to set the stage for future semesters.
Chapter Five

Rafael’s Narrative

“Sometimes I feel that things are going really fast, but I’m not able to reach the same speed” (Rafael, Interview 2)

5.0 Rafael: High expectations

Earlier literacy and undergraduate experiences

Rafael in many ways may be considered the more advanced student of the two presented in this study, advanced in his English language skills, in his standing as a PhD student, and as a researcher studying abroad on a full-time scholarship. He has made a long-term commitment to studies in the U.S., which all in all may add up to six years, after which he will return home to Chile to continue his scientific career. He has clear academic goals, similar to Riko, which may account for his extreme devotion to studies, but, unlike her, he has no present commitments that might otherwise distract him from his studies. Whereas much of Riko’s strengths may stem from her ability to multi-task, Rafael has a single purpose in being here to study, and has all the time necessary to dedicate to his academic pursuits.

Due to these circumstances, Rafael is and has been extremely committed to his studies, though he has not always found them easy. His memories of his early childhood educational experiences
are of the difficulties he underwent, and how hard he had to work to get by academically. His memories of those times reflect his critical nature of his own scholarly abilities, and his strong belief that grades were indicators of his learning potential. When asked about his earliest experiences in school learning his native language, this is what he recalls:

Rafael: Tough times, tough times. Yeah, it wasn’t easy for me to learn Spanish, I had bad grades. (Interview 3)

He recalls always getting off to a slow start at school, which at times troubled him, and how he began to realize that this was just his own way of responding to academic demands, slow at first but sure to reach his academic goals in the end:

Rafael: In high school, we have a scale of 1 to 7. Say I got a 6.1 the first year, a 6.2 the second year, 6.3 the third year, and the last year a 6.4. When I was an undergrad, it was the same thing. I was getting better grades. In time, I wasn’t spending more time on my studies, but I, let’s say, it’s something that is a function of time. (Interview 3)

For Rafael, sufficient time was all he needed in order to do something well. Currently, he still identifies strongly with this, as will be shown in this narrative of his first semester of graduate studies.

Rafael may be characterized by his slow but steady starts as well as by his determination to perform well. His tendency to critique himself harshly, his attitudes towards grades, as well as his willingness to devote himself entirely to his academic pursuits stand out prominently. Of these three, perhaps his self-appraisals will be most evident in this narrative, which may be attributed to how he views himself academically:

Rafael: Sometimes I think I have a high expectation of myself. (Interview 3)
Earlier undergraduate studies and writing

Rafael’s present studies will prepare him for research fields in the atmospheric sciences and oceanography. His interest in this research field began during his undergraduate studies in Natural Resource Sciences, studies that left a lot of open questions for him in terms of what he might do and how he might apply himself to a scientific career with only an undergraduate degree.

His L1 writing demands at the undergraduate level were mainly reports summarizing current research topics in the environmental fields, what he called “scientific issues.” Most course work at that time revolved around group-work, in which different group members took on different roles in the preparation of various research reports. He tended to take on the greatest responsibilities for the group, doing most of the writing, and proof-reading the other group members’ contributions:

Rafael: I basically wrote a lot, I used to be in charge of the reports, I don’t know, maybe I am most responsible, I used to do the most reports than my classmates, I used to finish all this kind of work, correcting the grammar. (Interview 1)

According to Rafael, the main purposes of his writing and group work were three-fold: learn how to carry out analyses of current research projects to determine causes and effects of certain environmental issues, develop skills of synthesis to apply these analyses to global issues, and, in the process, learn to communicate in a precise, accurate fashion.

Learning to write in a precise fashion to communicate complex ideas to a scientific audience was a primary goal of his education. He was able to explicate what this type of writing precision
entailed specifically: coherence of ideas achieved by identifying a main idea and then elaborating on it, development of complex organizational structures appropriate to his academic domain, attention to accurate grammar, and use of field-related lexis that he was now becoming better familiar with, skills that he recognized to have also been practicing at the IEP here in the U.S.

**Purpose of writing at graduate level**

If most of his writing at the undergraduate level may be considered knowledge-telling, involving more a transfer of ideas from original sources (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Ferenz, 2005), Rafael’s writing as part of a U.S. graduate-level program can be better classified as knowledge-transforming (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) in that now he is expected to take part in the academic discourse of his field in order to demonstrate intellectual growth (Leki & Carson, 1994).

Rafael explained that his present course of study prepares him to demonstrate his intellectual growth in the field in at least three ways, by (1) learning to apply his skills in creative fashions, (2) gaining familiarity with principles of research, and (3) beginning to conduct his own, original research.

When asked about what he considered the primary purpose of his exams from the instructors’ point of view, he surmised:

> Rafael: Yeah, that I can manage the concepts. Apply the concepts, or maybe the concepts in a creative way. (Interview 2)
Creativity can be defined in different ways. For Rafael, two definitions seem most appropriate: (i) The interplay between person, process, and situation which produces an original and useful product within a certain context (Plucker et al, 2004), and (ii) What is needed to confront a problem that has no previous solution (Torrance & Safter, 1999). Rafael recognized how at the graduate level creative approaches to answering questions is not only accepted, it is sometimes expected, even to the extent that students may disagree with their instructors:

Rafael:  I think if you justify the answer according to what the professor and you understand about the problem, I think you can have a different answer. I think it’s not a problem to disagree with the point of view of the professor, as long as it makes sense. (Interview 2)

Writing at the graduate level is meant to promote learning of highly advanced content knowledge, allowing creative means of synthesizing information. This is not surprising, since students in this field intend on pursuing careers that will include research with often novel problems. This, according to Rafael, is the “real scientific context” which his present studies and future career will ideally be founded upon.

Interviewer:  What do your professors want you to learn?
Rafael:  How to, maybe it gives us a real scientific context. This is mostly what we are going to do when we finish our studies. Get data, try to process the data in a proper way to analyze after that the data. Yeah, she wants us to get a feeling about what research possibly is. (Interview 2)

Doing research at the graduate level entails formulating original approaches to solving problems in the field. Multiple skills are needed at this advanced level:

Rafael:  Process the data and get some conclusions about some questions that I have to make, that I have to figure out. (Interview 2)
The extent to which Rafael would be able to demonstrate the skills of processing data and reaching relevant conclusions as evaluated on regular examinations depended largely on how he would adapt to test-taking conditions where he would have to express his ideas in clear, fluent English writing. Various barriers to his success in this were to become evident through his first semester, challenges discussed in the upcoming section.

5.1 Struggles

A summary of the reading and writing Rafael was assigned to do in his semester of work is provided in the table below.

Table 5.1: Description of Rafael’s writing during his first graduate semester

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clouds and Aerosols</td>
<td>approx. 17 chapters from different textbooks</td>
<td>Two midterms (short-answer) Webpage report on class project Mostly short answers on exams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atmospheric Dynamics</td>
<td>Two introductory textbooks for atmospheric sciences</td>
<td>Two midterms Take-home final exam Midterms with short-answer and quantitative problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radiative Transfer</td>
<td>One course textbook plus optional readings</td>
<td>Two exams Brief outline provided for project paper (five parts) Weekly homework Analysis project Analysis uses programming language Project paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 chapter/week</td>
<td>Weekly homework Project paper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rafael did weekly assignments for two out of three of his courses, homework that had the explicit purpose of solidifying students’ understanding of the readings and lectures. Many of the problems assessed the students’ data analysis skills, as well as their skills in using equations specific for the topics of the course. On average, Rafael estimated that he spent between 8 and 10 hours to complete each weekly assignment, a time commitment that paid off well, as he regularly received high marks on all these tasks.

For his three classes, he had to take seven exams, exams that included a mix of short answer questions, equations, and calculations. The short-answer questions required responses averaging about 75-100 words, with some requiring twice this. The number of calculations varied per exam, ranging anywhere between five and nine sets of problems. Each exam had a time limit of 90 minutes.

By Rafael’s assessment, a typical homework assignment contained less content than an average exam, although he spent almost six times as long on an assignment than he would have on his exams. He found that for his homework assignments, he was very careful with his work and of his use of the English language, which he needed to allow extra time for.

**Personal critique of writing abilities**

Rafael monitors quite closely his accurate use of language both in his L1, Spanish, and in his L2, English, especially in the writing medium. Achieving accuracy is a matter of pride for him and doing this well a matter of routine.
Rafael: I’m very critical of my writing, in English and in Spanish, now I’m working in English, in Spanish I like to review in very detail all the sentence, review what you wrote, what you wanted to say. (Interview 1)

The accuracy in written English expression that he strove for in his homework assignments would limit him in terms of his performance on examinations. Although arguably such limitations in terms of linguistic accuracy may have affected the overall quality of his written answers, more importantly his fluency was affected, i.e. the number of words he was able to write in a fixed period of time to demonstrate the necessary amount of content knowledge.

**Time management: Difficulty with exams**

The time limits for his exams presented Rafael with the greatest challenge of the semester. He typically prepared for each exam by rereading lecture notes and the assigned textbook chapters. Knowing the content material well would allow him to quickly identify which questions on a given exam he could respond to the most quickly, leaving the more difficult questions until the end.

For each of the six in-class exams that he took, his final results were similar.

Rafael: In my exams, both of them I couldn’t finish in the time the professor gave us. (Interview 2, 2.3)

On average, Rafael received 65% on each of his exams, an experience that he felt did not reflect his knowledge of the material. He believed his low scores to have been caused by three factors, (1) the overall processing speed needed to demonstrate the knowledge of course content in timed
situations, (2) how needing to think in English slowed him down in this pursuit, and (3) the increased pressure he felt being one of the last students to finish.

Rafael: It’s kind of harder, because I have to think exactly what I have to say and how to say it. (Interview 2)

Understanding the question, formulating a response to it, and wording the response in good English are all necessary to answer exam questions. Rafael initially felt that he could manage all three of these entirely in English. He considered his reading skills to be sufficient to understand the questions and his writing skills adequate as long as he did not need to search too long for any given word. The most difficult part, he concluded, was how he was formulating responses, i.e. his thought processes.

Rafael: When you know that you can do it well in your language and you see that in English you can’t do it so fast, it’s frustrating. (Interview 2)

The feelings of frustrations grew in each successive examination, which were compounded by another affective issue, how he felt when other students finished before him.

Rafael: I get nervous when people are leaving the room. (Interview 3)

Rafael confided that in the middle of the semester he did not know how to manage these feelings of nervousness and frustration to improve his overall exam performance. His high expectations of his reading and writing abilities would need to be examined in order to more realistically respond to future tasks.
**High expectations and frustration: A more complex picture of exam taking**

In his graduate studies, Rafael began to consider how his L2 reading and writing skills might have significant impact on his overall exam results. Looking back over different exams that he had taken, he called into doubt his reading comprehension under timed circumstances:

Rafael: I made some mistakes, for example, I don’t know, I missed the concept, I missed the point. (Interview 2)

He also wondered if his English writing was an accurate reflection of his thought processes:

Rafael: I realized I didn’t write what I thought at that time ... I knew the answer from the, for that question, but when I reread my answer, I realized I didn’t write what I had to write. (Interview 2)

Rafael has been practicing reading and writing in English nearly his entire educational career, and he wanted to believe that these skills would transfer well to U.S. graduate studies. It’s quite possible that, given enough time, he could demonstrate his understanding of the material on exams, as his performance on his homework assignments had shown. What he needed to consider at this point, then, was the time and effort he needed to read and write quickly in English, matters concerning his composing processes, his reading comprehension to understand what was being asked, and his vocabulary retrieval skills.

**Composing processes**

Rafael likes taking his time with his work. He was able to articulate his preferred composing process when working in his L1 with a partner.

Rafael: I wrote my part, my partner worked his part, and I was in charge of finishing the final version. Then, we spent some time reviewing, checking vocabulary, the spelling, basically after checking. (Interview 1)
Rafael’s self-reported composing process in his L1 and the accuracy that he has always tried to attain can only be indicative of the level of concern he has for his L2 writing. Writing accurately to communicate precise ideas placed a certain limitation on his L2 written expression at this time. Managing a balance between accuracy and fluency while composing in English was not an easy task. His experiences in this first semester would force him to reconsider his emphasis on accuracy, although appropriate strategies to achieve this did not come easily.

**Understanding assignments**

For both homework assignments and exams, reading comprehension is a central language skill that university-bound L2 students need to develop. During his IEP studies, Rafael had demonstrated full academic proficiency in his reading skills in two advanced reading seminars, showing that he could read and understand authentic texts with native-like speed, comprehend vocabulary in authentic texts, and recognize genre conventions for a wide variety of texts. For the most part, these skills served him well in his graduate-level homework assignments and exam questions, but he soon realized that the authentic texts of his science courses required a precision in understanding that he had not yet mastered.

Rafael: That’s another issue that I sometime have to deal with. If I understand, if I understand completely. (Interview 2)

He had learned adequate coping strategies to read and understand academic texts, strategies that were best suited to situations in which he had the time and resources needed. It is evident that reading speed decreases as the complexity of the material increases, a situation that Rafael also experienced. For homework assignments in particular, this meant he required a large amount of time going back and forth between the question, the larger text, and other sources of inspiration.
Rafael: The first step is try to understand the question. When I understand the question, I can figure out some way to go through the answer. I use my book to clarify some concepts, I use Google also to look for some hints about the answers. (Interview 2)

Searching through sources of information such as the Internet helped Rafael quickly locate and find:

- Vocabulary help (online dictionaries, contextual clues),
- Research journals discussing related topics,
- Similar problems posted by teachers and students, and
- A large number of distractions from his work

As stated earlier, Rafael typically spent 8-10 hours on each of his assignments. What is unclear for me is whether or not this particular search strategy helped him complete his work more quickly and more accurately, or if Internet searching provided too much information to process. It’s also possible that in the use of this strategy, he did not account for the amount of time that he spent off-task, checking email, his Facebook account, and other non-academic distractions.

**Vocabulary retrieval**

Vocabulary retrieval is a component of efficient language processing, and is recognized as one of the most serious shortcomings L2 students face in university settings (Leki & Carson, 1994). The ability to choose a word that is both correct and appropriate for a given situation is challenging, and even more so if we consider the general vocabulary skills expected of students at the
graduate level as well as the accurate use of specialized vocabulary in a specific discourse community.

A dictionary in some cases helps speed up the retrieval of certain items, an advantage that Rafael recognized for his home assignments:

Rafael: I can deliver an answer if I have time to do it, in my home, for example, writing down the answers, and sometimes to get into my dictionary to look for some terms.
(Interview 2)

In timed exam situations, however, the last thing a student needs is to get slowed down looking for the right word to express an idea, a circumstance Rafael was well familiar with.

Interviewer: So you spend a lot of time thinking about the right vocabulary word, or correcting your...
Rafael: ...and I get stopped in that. (Interview 2)

Though Rafael believed vocabulary retrieval was impeding his exam performance, and though he realized that a dictionary could be beneficial in some situations, he did not consider the use of one on his exams.

Rafael: I think it would be a loss of time. (Interview 2)

Professors often allow special circumstances for international students, including the use of a dictionary on an exam, as was the case in Riko’s classes. This fact did not elude Rafael entirely, he instead seemed to be falling back on the strategies that had worked for him in his L1 university career and, in many cases, was not making extra efforts to try out innovative strategies, though his learning situation had changed considerably since his undergraduate years.
Becoming a member of a disciplinary community: Social construction

As Riazi (1997) explains, becoming a member of a disciplinary community involves learning to address a certain disciplinary audience, knowing what standard discourse conventions are within the discipline, and recognizing central issues in the field. For students in the first semester of a degree program, the most crucial element of these perhaps is the need to define and commune with a disciplinary audience, people with whom insights about course work can be shared and from whom feedback in terms of performance can be received.

Group work

Rafael had learned the value of group work during his undergraduate studies. He expressed his desire to continue working closely with a group of peers before his graduate studies began, hoping there to learn “a new way to work.” He was also very capable of working alone, which he realized might be necessary the first few semesters of study until he had built more substantial socioacademic relations.

Rafael: I like to share ideas and work with people. I’m able, I mean, sometimes I like to work alone, write alone, but sometimes I think it is useful and necessary to share and to work with other people. (Interview 1)

The value of working within a group was clear to Rafael: questions about assignments could be clarified and general impressions about course work could be shared.

Rafael: We compare our results, and if someone didn’t understand the question or how to answer the question, we support each other. (Interview 2)

He established within these groups study partners, which was important for him because it helped break up his predominant study habit of reading and rereading texts. He made significant
steps with his peers towards synthesizing course content, by learning to better recognize central issues in the field and becoming more familiar with domain-specific vocabulary. He was thus able to gain a better sense of his field from the perspective of American students within the program, with whom otherwise he had very little contact.

With little doubt, however, his most expressed need from the group was to get some feedback on the work he was doing. He needed to share with other students how he was progressing, since the feedback he received from his instructors was minimal.

*Feedback from teachers vs. from classmates*

Rafael noted but did not seem particularly concerned by the limited amount of feedback he was receiving from his professors.

Interviewer:  Besides the final grades, did your teacher give you any other comments?  
Rafael:  Not really. (Interview 2)

Rafael did not hear much from his instructors about how he was doing, and, as will be discussed shortly, he tended to pay little attention to what they did comment to him. He remembered receiving feedback about an in-class presentation he made from both his professor and a classmate. One had a decidedly stronger impact on him than the other.

Rafael:  She [the professor] said that I used more time than I was allowed to, I include some figures in my presentation that were too small to see from the back side of the room, so, things like that. She usually gives us feedback to improve what we are doing. (Interview 3)

A central question about the nature of teacher feedback concerns how much feedback to give, and about what. Within L2 studies, it is argued that a teacher should provide feedback on all
aspects of a given task, including content, organizational structure, and overall quality (Ferris, 2003), while other scholars believe that practice and development over time are more crucial to improvement than intervention (as discussed in Casanave, 2004).

Whatever the case, it is clear here that the instructor’s feedback concerning the mechanics of presenting itself were deemed beneficial by Rafael. If feedback can be used as a tool to engage students in their work, however, the teacher might have also chosen to address, in writing or orally, additional dimensions of his performance. Written feedback, however, was limited to a letter grade, in this case an ‘A.’ Rafael also inadvertently missed his chance to receive immediate feedback from his peers, since he ran over the time limit allotted for his presentation, preventing any direct follow-up being made in the planned question-and-answer session.

As a confidence booster, though, one of his classmates commended his work. Peer feedback proved more immediately apparent to him than the feedback he received from his instructors, both in class and out.

Rafael: My classmates, she said twice that I did well in my presentations. At the end, she said, You did really well to be your first time, yeah, you did better than people I’ve seen doing this the third time with experience. (Interview 3)

Not talking with instructors

Feedback was in short supply from the instructors’ side, but Rafael also demonstrated little effort in approaching instructors directly.

Interviewer: Have you been talking much with your professors, during their office hours, before or after class, or by email?
Rafael: Not really, no. I think it’s because I don’t see the purpose of that. I mean, I email them or talk to them when I have some questions. It’s not usual. (Interview 3)

Rafael described three reasons why this was so:

(1) Regardless of his performance on his exams, he felt he was doing well

(2) Professors have more important things than to help a student come up with strategies for success, and

(3) He did not have anything concrete to ask them, or anything to suggest

**Not agreeing/understanding written feedback on an exam**

Upon going through one mid-term exam in the course of the second interview, Rafael found a correction the professor had made on one of his questions. We discussed the question and his answer, and Rafael was stuck on why his professor had taken off points. The question, it appeared, asked the students to think about a possible cause for a certain interaction between humans and the environment, and Rafael had speculated on an answer. The professor, however, only explained that his answer was not feasible, without notes on what the answer she was looking for actually was.

Rafael: Actually I don’t understand her point. So, here is a difference between, I think, her point of view, actually I should go talk to her, I didn’t realize her answer ... probably I should complain about this score. (Interview 2)

The difference, he figured, between the score he got and the score he deserved was enough to raise his score to a C-. He appeared quite sure he was going to discuss this with her at his next opportunity.
By the third interview, however, when the topic came up, No, he said, he had not been to visit her.

Overall, Rafael’s struggles with texts, composing processes, and discourse enculturation during his first semester can be summarized as:

- His strong self-appraisal of his L2 writing skills
- Not completing exams within time limits
- Reading comprehension being lower than needed to achieve speed
- Writing difficulties with vocabulary retrieval
- Not receiving useful feedback from his professors on his performance
- Not willing to approach his professors for consultations

5.2 Strategies

Need for speed

Automaticity, what Brown (2007) calls a “relatively unlimited automatic mode of processing” (p. 64) is an essential skill to develop in all areas of language proficiency leading to fluent production of language forms. Certain conditions may inhibit automaticity, including:
• Personal learning style
• Complexity of language being processed
• Complexity of content
• Time needed to search for vocabulary items and formulate thoughts in writing
• Affective issues, e.g., increased nervousness due to environmental issues

In Rafael’s test-taking situations, each of these played a part and limited his abilities to perform quickly and well on his tests. He realized he could work on four out of five of these issues over time, while the first, his own personality traits, he accepted as given. In essence, he accepted his own limitations. The metacognitive strategy he was employing to resolve the situation is known as problem identification (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Rafael: Some people go faster, and some people go slower. So, I don’t know, in some ways I have to adapt myself to the system, to the faster system. (Interview 3)

Rafael’s study habits (discussed below) aimed to improve his performance in the latter four conditions inhibiting his automaticity. He felt that given enough time, he would overcome each of these other performance-reducing factors, i.e. by becoming more fluent in the English language, familiarizing himself thoroughly with the content studied in each of his courses, and in the process gaining more control of his adverse reactions of frustration, nervousness, and mind block, “Control or be controlled,” as he told me.

A need for speed in language processing is a common worry for second language students (Barbier & Spinelli-Jullien, 2009; Cumming, Busch, & Zhou, 2002; Leki & Carson, 1994; Spack, 1988), what was expressed by participants in Leki & Carson’s (1994) study as a “desire
for efficiency” (p. 91). Achieving this efficiency in the short-run is not always possible, clearly not within the time frame of one semester.

Rafael realized this. He realized that improved overall speed on exams would come about over the course of many years. When asked what he might do about it in the middle of the semester, at the time when his grades seemed to be suffering the most, he was unsure. We discussed talking with his professors and asking for more time, an idea he was completely against.

Rafael: That’s the context in a midterm. I don’t expect to have more time for that fact, I don’t want more time, so I’m trying to push myself to go faster, and to go more accurately with my answers. (Interview 2)

“I don’t want more time” implies that Rafael did not want to be treated differently than any of his classmates. His position as a graduate student meant him adapting to the program, not the program adapting to him. He did not want to take advantage of any special circumstances for international students, although his grades might have improved if he had. This view, however, after one semester of study and a great number of frustrations, would change by the end-of-the-semester interview, in which he asserted for his second semester he would certainly address this issue with his professors. Instead of asking for more time at the end of an exam, in which he would still have to undergo the pressure of other students finishing before him, he thought it would be a good idea to ask for permission to begin the exam earlier.

**Planning: Self-management**

Another metacognitive strategy that Rafael seemed naturally inclined towards was planning for his work in advance and getting things done before due dates.
Rafael: I always try to be done with my homeworks two days before they are due, to evaluate them, so in that way, I have the opportunity to share my answers with my classmates, or compare if we have the same or maybe not. (Interview 3)

The organization of his study routine is a clear instance of goal-directed strategy use (Waters & Schneider, 2010), a certain strategy employed with intentionality. His purposes for this seem clear: he realized that receiving high marks on his homework assignments would offset some of the lower marks from his exams.

Self-management (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990) compensated for some of the shortcomings Rafael had to deal with, indeed, it was one of the few factors that he could control. Concerted, consistent time commitment to studying was Rafael’s primary response to the demands he faced.

Rafael: My own studies, I wake up at 8 in the morning, I go to sleep around 11. I have the whole day studying. I don’t know, if I have to quantify my studies, maybe 8 or 10 hours every day, even weekends. (Interview 2)

Understandably, the demands of graduate work justify such a commitment. Rafael, as an international student on a scholarship, here had one advantage over his native peers, in that he had few distractions in terms of family, friends, or job requirements. Rafael took a stance on studying so intensely.

Rafael: Well, it’s, I think it’s okay, it’s fine. It’s kind of a work, it’s my job, my studies, it’s not bad. (Interview 2)

The payoff for a graduate student is years down the road. The commitment that Rafael made now is for that distant future, for which he had a clear goal and means to achieve that goal.
**Reading a lot**

Rafael’s courses this semester each required students to read approximately one chapter weekly, sometimes more. Rafael figured the bare minimum for any given week was 150 pages of dense text. Reading made up a significant part of his daily studying routine. A positive attitude towards this was beneficial.

Rafael: Yeah, I’ve been reading a lot, more than I used to. It’s really nice. (Interview 3)

Rafael preferred a ‘brute’ attack to reading, i.e. reading more and rereading often, practice that comes about by repeating (Oxford, 1990). He felt that upon his first reading he was not able to retain a lot of the important information.

Rafael: Yeah, I reread the whole material. I go through them again, every written thing about the classes. (Interview 2)

Two overt strategies helped improve his reading performance. The first involves the setting where he could better read. Ten hours of studying at home may not amount to much with frequent breaks to keep up with friends, check the news, and other distractions, which Rafael felt prone to. The strategy he describes here is directed attention (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990), the creating of favorable conditions for learning to take place, an indirect strategy that contributes significantly to the learning process (Oxford, 1990).

Rafael: The other thing I’m doing, if I have to read, now I read them out of my house. Or otherwise I spend, I stay at my computer, I read my emails, I get distracted very easy. (Interview 3)

A second reading strategy he described illustrates his use of advance organization, which helped him prepare for the reading tasks on exams. The strategy involves reading for gist as well as an evaluation of his abilities (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990).
Rafael: So, what I did here was, first I read the whole exam, and I said this is easier for me, so I went for the easier questions first. (Interview 2)

This quick evaluation of a text for content, known as overviewing, helped Rafael identify which parts of readings could be processed most easily, a skill of accomplished readers (Afflerbach & Cho, 2010). At this stage of his learning, Rafael applied overviewing automatically to reading tasks, a learning technique that he had made effective use of in his undergraduate studies.

Besides working together with others in group work as described above, Rafael employed also a wide variety of social and affective strategies to help him cope emotionally with the demands of the semester. As one affective strategy, Rafael encouraged himself in the interviews through positive statements and self-talk, displaying his confidence in being able to improve his performance.

Rafael: I can do better. (Interview 2)

He discussed his low scores in exams with an air of resignation, as if he almost expected this to happen. It seemed he was well familiar with himself and his learning process, and that getting off to a slow start was typical for him.

Rafael: What I know now, what I’ve learned about myself, and I’ve been saying this many times, when I start something, it’s very hard for me. But when I’m going like, in time, it’s getting easier. (Interview 3)

This type of realization might have had the effect of lowering anxiety about his present situation. Rafael recognized that his learning difficulties were natural, and that they would be overcome in time. Rafael related his experience now with similar experiences in grade school, high school, and in his undergraduate studies. His grade school studies, remember, he had called “tough,” his
high school grades had started off low and then gradually improved, and his undergraduate studies were much the same. Although Rafael could not deny his frustration about his learning process, he also understood it as a limitation he had, and for that he accepted it.

**Support from international friends**

Socially, Rafael started off the semester with only one local friend, and a lot of acquaintances. The majority of these acquaintances were international students from the IEP where he had been studying, and although he enjoyed their company, he lamented that most were too young or had religious beliefs that prevented them from having a beer out from time to time. He did receive a lot of emotional support from these students, however, especially as he discovered that what he was going through was far from unique, indeed it seemed to be a given for international students that they would experience the same set of struggles with language barriers, slow processing speeds, and a relative withdrawal from the native community.

Rafael: The other day I was talking to my friend, ..., He told me that he felt the same, that he’s feeling the same. That he’s going slower than in his language, Arabic, something that is common when you are studying with another language. (Interview 3)

The benefits of having studied at the IEP proved to be greater than the linguistic and academic skills he had practiced there. It helped him become a member of a small community of international students with whom he could find support, casual talk, and play the occasional soccer game. He also described reaching out to old friends studying in different parts of the country.

Rafael: I called to a friend studying in Chicago, he says that he has been feeling the same way, it’s going not as fast as he wants. I’m the same case here. (Interview 2)
Acquaintances from the IEP were generally speaking only that, people to run into from time to
time. Friends did not come easy for Rafael, at least in the year that he had been in the U.S. He
attributed this to being from a different culture, although it might also have been a simple factor
of sharing a common language.

Rafael: Well, I met some people from, two of them are from Spain, and the other one is
from Peru. I’m meeting them very often, once a week. That’s cool. It’s easier to
meet new people when you know first the language, and when you know the (+)
culture in common. (Interview 3)

The people we are most comfortable spending greater lengths of time with speak the same
language, talk about the same types of things, and can relax around one another without needing
to be overly self-conscious.

**Self-reinforcement through cognitive ease: Gaining familiarity**

His graduate studies so far had kept him on full alert for new information, academic and cultural,
mostly straining him by the amount of effort he had to apply in each new learning situation. Not
all of his first semester had been frustrating. Rafael also had moments when things seemed to fall
into place for him, where his repeated struggles at trying to do well finally paid off.

In the second half of his semester, Rafael began to demonstrate traits characteristic of cognitive
ease (Kahneman, 2011), which he achieved by becoming ‘familiar’ with material. “Familiar,”
Rafael laughed in one interview, “I like that word.” ‘Familiar’ for Rafael carries a strong
meaning of ‘family’ and of the feelings he has when he is with people he knows well. He
described these feelings of comfort aroused by *familiarity* with one presentation that he made.
He was presenting some of his own research, and, as he said, he was the only person who knew this material so thoroughly. This gave him a sense of ease in front of a large group of peers and his professor.

Rafael: I didn’t feel anxious, I was very relaxed. That was interesting for me. I could be like nervous, but I was relaxed. I felt comfortable with the information I was talking about, because I studied it very carefully, and I knew what I had to say. (Interview 3)

Becoming more familiar with the topics he was studying helped him to overcome his anxieties, one of presenting to a large group of peers, and, two, doing so in his second language. This experience and the cognitive ease that Rafael demonstrated may very well be indicative of how he will fare in future semesters, when he has better mastered the topics of the field. As in his earlier studies in high school and undergraduate work, things for him are hard in the beginning, but persisting with his study ethic leads to greater success in the end.

**Physical activity**

One other strategy exemplifies the type of student that Rafael is. Studying 10 hours a day, every day, is not an easy feat, for the mind or for the body. Being able to briefly step away from studies was an important strategy for him.

Rafael: I think physical activity is essential to study. I feel stopped sometimes, my brain can’t work at all, and I go outside or go to the gym or run, when I go back to the work, now I see the answer, which is a relief. (Interview 2)

Rafael continued living actively through this first semester in order to return to his work with greater enthusiasm. His more regular activities of running and going to the gym were solitary sports, but he also found the time once a week to join in pick-up soccer games. Fresh air, increased adrenaline, and camaraderie provided him with a needed distraction from the grind of
his studies. His view was that maintaining a healthy body helped maintain a healthy mind, contributing to healthy student living.

To conclude this section on strategies, a summary of Rafael’s self-reported tools for coping with the rigor of academic life is compiled here.

- **Problem identification** (awareness of his own shortcomings in terms of processing speeds)
- **Self-management** (maintaining a tight control of his study habits)
- **Repeating** (his habit of reviewing notes and texts constantly)
- **Directed attention** (removing distractors from his studying environment)
- **Advanced organization** (his reading habit of overviewing for main idea on exams)
- **Self-talk** (his confidence in his own abilities)
- **Cooperation with peers** (group work for studying, international peers for moral support)
- **Physical activity** (living a healthy lifestyle)

Rafael certainly employed other strategies, either consciously or unconsciously, through the course of this semester. The ones discussed in interviews demonstrate his professionalism as a student, and hopefully indicate the greater degree of success awaiting him in future semesters. To better envision these future semesters, the next section takes a closer look at his academic, professional, and personal goals that Rafael has set for them.
5.3 Goal setting

Rafael described various goals that he had, goals ranging from the short-term to the long-term, some academic, others professional, and still others personal. He worked towards the goals that he felt strongly about with intensity, commitment, and intention (Cumming, 2006), as evident in the exposition of the strategies in the above section.

**English language learning goals**

Rafael’s hope for the development of his English language skills was foremost on his mind. He had made the commitment to spend at least five years in the United States on a full-time basis, and he recognized that one of the returns on this commitment would be his mastery of the language.

Rafael: Talking about skills, I’d like basically, to talk with fluency, and write fluency, just think about an issue, and you start writing, and writing correctly or without errors, with just few mistakes, that’s what I’d like to do. (Interview 1)

Fluency in writing is defined by Reid (1990) as “language that produces stretches of connected discourse” (p. 195), writing without stopping in the creation of longer texts. Within the context of his graduate work, this type of writing fluency will be necessary, if not sooner then later. Although this first semester of work involved mostly short, timed writings for exams, within in a year or two he expects to commit himself to daily research and writing for his dissertation.

If writing fluently implies writing with fewer pauses, being able to keep pen to paper or finger to keyboard for longer periods of time, then Rafael will have to come to terms with his perceived
tendency to mix his L1 and L2 thinking processes. One of his goals is to integrate with the target language community of English speakers at least on a mental level.

He discussed this goal in relation to his current approach to answering exam questions, an approach of thinking in his L1 and writing in his L2 that he considered inefficient yet necessary.

Rafael: I’m trying to deal with it, as I told you, maybe using a mix of English and Spanish to solve the problems. But at some point, what I expect is just one way, just English. (Interview 2)

**Improving performance**

As his L2 thinking skills continue to develop, Rafael expects to experience a jump in his overall processing speed, which will substantially affect his study routines.

Rafael: I expect for example to (+) to go faster in assimilating concepts and information, I expect to be this year to understand things, I expect spend less time in doing my homework. (Interview 3)

Performance at the university level may be closely correlated with the quick, accurate processing of ideas. Rafael hopes that a chain of cause and effects, from quicker thought processes leading to less time spent doing homework leading to more time to focus on other aspects of his learning, will lead to successful results in his present course work, completion of his PhD studies, and, most importantly, integration into the discourse community of atmospheric scientists.

This chain of events, meanwhile, is mediated at the university level through the evaluation of skills and understanding of content knowledge by course instructors. Gaining speed in thought and subsequent improved performance on course work will be primarily reflected in the grades
that a student receives. Good grades, within the educational context, represent a short-term goal that students work towards in order to demonstrate their commitment to and mastery of the material.

Rafael concurred with this interpretation of the value of grades. He used grades typically to help him assess his own knowledge, to give him an idea of what areas of his knowledge were still deficient. In some ways, Rafael recognized grades as a measurement of what he was doing wrong, and low grades as a result of his mistakes.

Rafael: I think it shows if I’m understanding, if I have confusions with concepts, or (+) I think it’s a way to (+) encourage you to do better, or, that you have to take care of something, that maybe you’re not doing well. Maybe it’s not something objective,... (Interview 3)

Within a scientific discipline, this reflection on grades as not being necessarily “objective” is particularly striking. This may in effect be a simple way of distancing himself from his own low performance as evaluated by his instructors. If grades serve on one level to measure performance, on a second level they are meant as a means to motivate students to work harder. Rafael’s identification with this second interpretation of grades is revelatory, in that even sub-standard performance provoked a positive response in his thinking.

He also reflected on grades as related to his homework assignments, and if professors’ evaluations were an accurate reflection of the skills and knowledge he had been acquiring.

Rafael: I think it works, in a way. It’s pretty different if I see 100% on my homeworks, or 50% on my homeworks. That I’m doing something right. So. (Interview 3)
If grades sometimes were punishment for mistakes, they also could be rewards for improved performance, feedback that made sense to him. Which of these aspects of grading more motivated Rafael towards his future academic success remains to be seen.

His primary academic goal before the start of the semester was simple and clear.

Rafael: Well, to be an expert in this science. To manage the theory with accuracy, be like, an expert in the theory of Atmospheric Science, it’s complex, but I think I can do it. (Interview 1)

Two of his academic goals have thus been identified. One has to do with his English language skills, and the second with the scientific content of his field. Combining his language learning goals and this scientific pursuit, his goals revolve around the need to gain fluency (in language skills) and accuracy (in the management of domain-specific theory). Either one of these academic goals, pursued with enough vigor and commitment, represents the need for significant work to be done. Together, they present quite a challenge. By the end of the semester, Rafael had started to taste the sweet joy of success, but he also felt the aftereffects of five months of relentless work at the graduate level. He reflected on his feelings as the semester began to wind down:

Rafael: I’m okay, I’m happy. I just want to finish. (Interview 3)

Professional goals

Rafael envisions his career as a balance between research and teaching. His reasons for wanting to become a researcher are to serve the larger community, which he feels has been mostly misinformed about the reality of current issues in the field.
Rafael: The Atmospheric Sciences nowadays is like a big issue with the climate change, actually, I think what I feel is that people sometimes are misinformed, like sometimes peoples misunderstand the news, or the newspapers, wrong things about the climate. So, for me to be a scientist in this area would be an import to the community. (Interview 1)

He provides similar reasons for wanting to teach.

Rafael: Yeah, sometimes there are misunderstandings about this issue, so to become a teacher or an instructor would mean to be able to improve the communication with the community, maybe in the classroom or out. (Interview 1)

This community that Rafael speaks of reasonably extends beyond national borders of his home country to the international domain. In reality, reaching this greater audience means for the most part mastering the English language, the *lingua franca* of research journals and the international forum. The choice to study at a U.S. university is based on many factors. The first explicit goal mentioned in interviews which was reflected in nearly all of his other concerns was Rafael’s explicit desire to become a proficient and advanced English language speaker and writer.

*Time for family, time for self*

In this first semester, there was little time for anything but studying and related course work. Rafael did not speak of his family and friends back home much, perhaps being here so far from them kept them largely off his mind, providing one less distraction from his studies and thus another reason for coming to the U.S. in the first place. By the end of the semester, with a holiday break near in which he would travel home, he finally had time to give them a little thought.
Rafael: I need that time to say that I’m done, relax myself and think about the next semester and think about my family. It’s like, everyday I’m thinking about school, every single day. I need that day to say, I have nothing to do. (Interview 3)

Rafael’s family was fully supportive of his decision to study in the U.S. and had managed to accept the great distance between them and the number of years he would be away. In the future, Rafael intends on returning and being close to his family and friends to fulfill the role of son and brother to his family members along with the role of researcher and university instructor. His plans to serve the community as a professional in his field are just as important to him as his personal goals of staying in close contact with his family and native culture, though at the present his professional and academic goals entirely command his attention.

5.4 Conclusion

Participants in a study focusing on L2 university students by Leki & Carson (1994) expressed the following areas to be of greatest concern as they strove to meet their educational demands:

- Language skills (including better control of grammatical issues and vocabulary recognition)
- Task management strategies (how to respond to tasks assigned in course work)
- Thinking skills (including strategy use for planning and self-monitoring)

A central element in each of these concerns for the participants in Leki & Carson (1994) was the issue of time, a concern that also dominates Rafael’s first semester of work at the graduate level. Rafael drew a degree of comfort knowing that struggling with time demands was a common
problem amongst international students at foreign universities, an idea that was certainly reinforced by his contact with other L2 students that he kept in contact with.

Student perceptions of difficulties in adequate written expression in an L2 have been extensively documented (Hyland, 2003; Silva, 1992, 1993), supporting the claim that linguistic concerns are the greatest impediment to speed for L2 students in academic settings. As such, the relation of timed-writing demands with grammatical accuracy and academic vocabulary skills was evident in Rafael’s experience. Although he did not explicitly discuss the impact of grammar on his writing fluency, it must have played an issue, especially knowing his predilection for grammatical accuracy while writing in his L1. Furthermore, Rafael was greatly concerned with the effect his writing would have on his readers, and placed an emphasis on learning the academic register of his domain, both for exams and to better understand reading course material.

As the bulk of his course work was evaluated on exams, Rafael needed to develop increased speed in reading and writing. His task management strategies did not appear effective, in that his studying routine of reading and rereading all the relevant chapters of his textbooks before each exam did not lead to higher exam results. The amount and complexity of these texts and subsequent exams required a more consistent and efficient reading approach to help him consolidate the skills and knowledge he was learning. Regardless of his struggles, he did not take recourse in discussing his situation with his professors. Overall, it appears these two central task management strategies were not fully developed within the context of his first semester.
In view of Rafael’s self-awareness of his own limitations, and that his earlier grade school, high school, and undergraduate experiences had prepared him for the slow start he experienced at the graduate level, it appears that Rafael is an accomplished student and writer in his L1, and learning to effectively transfer the skills and intuitions from his L1 academic environment to the new L2 domain should only be a matter of time. In this first semester of study, he has apparently noticed the need for more fine-tuned thinking skills to achieve the advanced academic literacy of his disciplinary community. His awareness of his own limitations and the need to overcome them will inform his approach to the challenges of his future semesters.
Chapter Six

Discussion

6.0 Report on results

Data analysis was performed in three sequences: (i) interviews were transcribed, (ii) a coding scheme (see Appendix) was developed to code transcriptions and written material from courses, and (iii) data was grouped according to relevant coding schemes, and further analyzed to identify like categories. Looking at similar categories across the two participants allowed for a cross-analysis to be carried out. To help demonstrate the complex set of variables involved in the development of academic literacy skills, a comparison between the two research participants follows.

The first semester of regular university studies is challenging. Students need to get up to pace with the expectations of their course work, manage multiple tasks across different courses, maintain a balance of these with the day-to-day demands of their lives, come to terms with their new role as a student and the long-term commitment this entails, and all the while struggle with the feelings of frustration, stress, and possible disappointment common to the university experience. The challenge for second-language students is compounded by needing to overcome a language gap, not only from their L1 to L2, but also from mainstream-literacy to academic-literacy practices. Riko and Rafael both started their U.S. university studies with substantial previous English-language exposure, and both were considered academically proficient in their
language skills considering their previous English-language studies, their TOEFL scores, and their extended course work at a state-side Intensive English Program (IEP). They both had high motivations to succeed. Yet, challenges still lingered throughout their first semesters, many of which were language-bound. They adapted and developed strategies in response to these challenges without losing sight of their long-term academic and professional goals.

In order to be able to compare the two research participants’ experiences in the following section, a closer look at the similarities between them is first highlighted. Afterwards, some points of how their experiences differed will also be shown.

As for their previous educational experiences, Riko and Rafael share some commonalities. For one, they both had already completed their first university degree in their native country before coming to the U.S. However, in this regards, it’s important to remember that Riko had completed this more than a dozen years previously, while for Rafael it was only fairly recently that he had graduated. From their early undergraduate studies, they had developed an effective writing process in their L1, the skills of which they were able to transfer when re-learning the process for L2 language writing. Additionally, they both studied English at a U.S. IEP prior to regular university studies, Riko for more than a year and Rafael for six months. In both their cases, this academic English training immediately preceded the entrance into their first university semester.

Other common features of both participants are evident through this first semester. From their self-reports and an examination of syllabuses from their courses, they both had extensive reading
assignments to do, on an average of 100 pages/week. They had multiple exams to complete, Riko more so than Rafael. During their exams, they were among the last to finish, which made them nervous as other students left the room. As a result of these time limitations on exams, the novel exam formats, and their expressed inability to understand questions quickly, they both had poor exam results in the first half of the semester. They recognized academic lexical knowledge to be a limiting factor in their overall success, which extended beyond the use of domain-specific lexis to the more complex nature of academic texts generally. Despite these setbacks, they were unsure of how to approach professors for help in the first half of the semester, and felt frustrated by their initial lack of success.

The mid-point of the semester marked a turning point between the cases of the two participants. Riko took one path, and Rafael seemingly another. As a result of their choices and individual circumstances, they both met with differing degrees of success. The circumstances that contributed to their trajectories after the middle of the semester are summarized here for each participant.

Riko’s success took an upward swing at mid-semester. This was due in part to how she took advantage of special circumstances for international students, including requesting extra time and the use of a dictionary for exams. These factors in themselves may seem insignificant; however, it is the manner by which she achieved these special circumstances that is essential: she began to approach professors and TAs for help. Once she had broken through the barrier between herself and her instructors, asking for the use of a dictionary and extra time on exams, her confidence
increased to talk to them more regularly. As a result, her exam difficulties slowly dissipated, her questions and doubts could be individually addressed by the instructors and TAs, and her performance on exams began to improve. Additionally, she considered multiple strategies to increase her academic vocabulary knowledge, including one-on-one talk with instructors, flash cards, and regular reading and research. She paid close attention to the feedback her instructors gave her, readily considering their comments as an important tool in learning. She made every effort to integrate with the greater community of native English speakers through this talk with instructors, other classmates, and members of the community. Once her initial struggles had passed, she experienced enjoyment of learning more regularly, a feeling she often described as ‘excitement.’

The mid-term for Rafael did not mark such a change in performance or attitude. He was not surprised by this, in fact, he considered it a personality trait. His early-school years and undergraduate studies had been very similar: he had then, like now, always gotten off to a slow start and through persistence and dedication to his goal, achieved excellence only in the long-run.

This one semester for Rafael then only represents the first leg of his long academic run. This is exemplified by his preference for tried-and-tested strategies rather than experimenting with new ones, for example how he maintained a ‘brute’ attack on studying, reading and rereading class texts through the semester as his primary source of preparing for exams. He was able to do this, perhaps, because, unlike Riko, he was able to dedicate all his time to the sole pursuit of academic studies. Also unlike Riko, he did not appear to be interested in taking advantage of special
circumstances for international students: he did not want to and did not ask for extra time on exams and he preferred not to use a dictionary, citing it as a potential ‘loss of time.’ His strategies did not change, nor did his exam results. He appeared hesitant about discussing his situation with professors, and he did not especially consider the feedback he reported to have received from them. In terms of socioacademic relations, he established friendships within his L1-speaking community and with other international students, while his contact with native-English speakers was confined mainly to the classroom through regular class interaction and the requirements for group work. His feelings about his studies and his performance did not significantly change over the semester: he felt frustrated and overworked from the beginning until the end.

The above summaries of the two participants’ experiences reflect only a small degree of the similarities and differences between them. With these comparisons now stated, however, further commentary on these results is possible, followed by (1) interpretations of the results in terms of individual academic trajectories, (2) comparison with other research, and (3) explanations for the results.

6.1 Commentary on results

In order to comment on the similarities and differences between the first semesters of the two participants, it is important to note the balance between context and the individual (Leki, 2007) in determining the outcome of a student’s experience.
As a first-semester undergraduate, Riko took only content courses, the general education courses required of freshman. The main learning objective of content courses, according to Spack (1988), is for students to understand, remember, and show understanding on examinations. Examination writing within a discipline, however, such as the courses that Rafael took within his first semester, “Requires a complete, active, struggling engagement with the facts and principles of a discipline...the persuading of other investigators that one’s knowledge is legitimate” (Rose, 1985, as quoted by Spack, 1988, p. 38).

For the following commentary on results, this fundamental difference between the two contexts of the participants’ situations remains highlighted. How this context of study interacts with individual differences will be further discussed in the Interpretations section.

**Commentary on similarities and differences**

IEP studies prior to beginning regular studies, though not required by this university, have a number of advantages for international students. These advantages can be summarized in terms of the writing instruction students receive, the socioacademic relations they there foster, and the general study strategies they practice.

Riko and Rafael both commented on the effectiveness of the writing instruction they received at the IEP, since both had been unsure of the discourse conventions that would be expected of them in their later studies. Riko was influenced by the research assignments she had to do, primarily because she had had no earlier experience with these in her Japanese undergraduate studies and
therefore was unaware of the resources available to her (university database, library, journals) and the expected organization of the final written product. Rafael, with his previous undergraduate studies only recently completed, had a greater impression of how to carry out independent writing projects and the conventions of U.S. writing institutions. He felt that timed writing assignments were the most beneficial for him, since he had only little previous experience with writing in English on a regular basis. Both students made use of these skills for their TOEFL writing examination, though here Riko still struggled the most with organizational issues, while Rafael focused mostly on content of his responses. In terms of TOEFL writing results, both participants did better than they had expected.

For writing processes, both participants were able to articulate a clear and effective manner of composing written text, stating clearly from beginning to end what needed to be done to arrive at a satisfactory composition. Riko had the process engrained into memory, while it appeared Rafael’s more recent university studies provided him with a more natural feel for how to approach a writing task. Riko seemed most drawn to the beginning stages of composing (seeking out resources and organizing thoughts), while Rafael appeared more concerned with the final stages (revision of content and check of grammatical accuracy). This suggests that Rafael was able to more adequately transfer L1 writing skills than was Riko, again perhaps due to his more recent and more academically-oriented writing experiences, while Riko had been out of school for some time.
Insufficient time on exams became a major preoccupation for both Riko and Rafael, a common concern for L2 students (Leki & Carson, 1994). The multiple-choice exams that Riko had to do required her fast processing of vast amounts of content knowledge, recognition of academic vocabulary, and coming to terms with what she called the “American” style of exams. Rafael mainly had to respond to questions in short-answer format, requiring a precision of language in a short amount of time that he was not able to manage adequately. Running out of time on exams, for the first half of the semester, accounted for the nervousness they both felt and their poor results.

Another factor that led to less-than-expected exam results was how Riko and Rafael struggled with learning to recognize and use academic vocabulary, a challenge facing many L2 students (Cumming, Busch, & Zhou, 2002; Leki & Carson, 1994; Silva, 1992; Victori, 1999). The importance of academic vocabulary recognition was especially apparent to them during lectures, in the class readings, and in trying to understand exam questions. Both participants felt they used more time than they had on exams trying to figure out what was expected of them in terms of a response. Rafael had greater difficulties with the production of academic vocabulary and spent significant time searching for the right word. This was less of a situation for Riko only because her exams did not include short, written responses.

One central element of becoming part of a disciplinary community is learning to interact with members of the field. For students at the undergraduate and graduate level, these people are primarily the faculty members who instruct their courses. Both participants were initially unsure
how and why to approach professors for help in the first half of the semester. Large classes made this particularly difficult for Riko, since she felt instructors would have little time for individual students; establishing a reason why was difficult for Rafael, largely since it did not appear he wanted to be given preferential treatment due to his non-native English-speaking status. Riko took more advantage of her status as an NNES in the second half of the semester and began to approach all of her instructors. In return, she gained: permission to begin exams before other students, to take one exam separately in the professor’s office, and the use of a dictionary. Additionally, her Anthropology professor provided her with personalized instruction during office hours.

Both participants had extensive reading assignments within their course work, mostly from course textbooks. Focusing strategies (Leki, 1995) helped them make the most of their study routines, strategies that included reading and rereading the text, using a highlighter to indicate central ideas, and reading material related to the course book in order to gain additional background information. Riko expressed particular difficulty with her Sociology textbook for her lack of cultural background knowledge, feeling that without a more thorough understanding of some elements of American culture, much of the text was impenetrable for her.

As a result of the above issues, the feelings of frustration, nervousness, and later exhaustion that both Riko and especially Rafael felt were to be expected, especially considering also their initial lack of success. Frustration resulted from their low exam scores, a feeling that was intensified for at least two reasons: (i) both participants were high achievers used to receiving high grades in
their academic pursuits, and (ii) they both felt these scores did not reflect the effort they were putting into their studies, nor the amount of content knowledge they had actually acquired. Riko’s primary strategy was to adapt to the system, and thereafter did everything she could in order to improve her grades and decrease her anxieties. Rafael did not appear to change his routine: he continued to work at the same determined pace through the semester. He seemed aware of his limitations and accepted them, at least on some levels. He felt confident that though he had not done as well as he would have liked, that his performance would improve in future semesters.

6.1.1 Interpretations: Accounting for differences in academic literacy learning paths

With the aim of providing a model for interpretation of the results of the present study, research into individual factors that influence L2 learning is considered (Arabski & Wojtaszek, 2011; Hyland, 2003; Larsen-Freeman, 2011). Differences that account for varying levels of academic literacy learning include: attitude towards the L2 culture, learner goals, motivation and attitude to learning, and the willingness to take risks. Within this framework for interpretation, it is suggested that some degree of generalizability may be possible beyond the individual level (Larsen-Freeman, 2011). Each of these factors can now be discussed.

Social environmental influences

A social environmental influence that played a role for both participants was their attitude toward the L2 culture. Riko found it easy to integrate into the community of native English speakers, at
least when it was necessary to do so for academic assignments. She did not have any difficulty
starting conversation with local business owners for community service projects, made regular
appointments with her advisor through the semester, and discussed openly her struggles with her
different instructors. Data from this study suggest, on the other hand, that Rafael felt more
comfortable with other international students, particularly those with whom he shared a cultural
and linguistic background. He did find group work with native English speakers within in
discipline worthwhile, but his relationship with his instructors was less open. These findings
might only suggest that there is a relationship between Riko’s status as a permanent resident in
the U.S. and her openness to participate with the local community versus Rafael’s status as a
short-term, visa-holding visitor.

**Learner goals**

Learner goals for both participants in this study included to gain proficiency in the English
language and to become effective professionals within their field. For both, these two goals were
integrally linked: for Riko, near-native proficiency in English means she will be able to carry out
the responsibilities of a social worker, communicating aptly and professionally with the diverse
group of people this job will bring her into contact with, and also as a parent living within an
English-speaking community. For Rafael, a career in the sciences entails contact with an
international community whose primary means of communication is through the English
language.
Motivation and attitude toward learning

Motivation is evident in how learners apply sustained effort to a particular action in order to accomplish a specific goal (Dornyei, 2001). Leki (1995) describes five demands students need to manage simultaneously: the semester as a whole, individual courses, individual assignments, resulting cognitive strain, and the demands of life. Riko appeared to be an effective multi-tasker in these regards, balancing school and family demands. She made choices wisely to manage her competing demands better, for example, by dropping one course near the beginning of the semester. She used study strategies to manage her cognitive load, reviewing vocabulary words, notes, and course readings until they became familiar. She regularly invested time into her course assignments from the very first night they were assigned. In the process she learned to experience more often a sense of cognitive ease, the feelings that what had previously been novel was now familiar, true, good, and achieved effortlessly (Kahneman, 2011). Rafael, on the other hand, appeared to be more single-minded in his attention, able to dedicate all his time and effort to the pursuit of his studies. Though he was an intense, dedicated student, working ten hours daily every day of the week and consistently finishing assignments before they were due, his examination results through the semester do not suggest he was yet able to lessen the cognitive strain he experienced.

Willingness to take risks

A salient factor in students’ motivation and attitude towards learning is their willingness to take risks (Dornyei, 2001). In this study, participants showed varying degrees of risk-taking in their willingness to talk to teachers, to discuss academic events with their peers, and to consider and
ask for feedback from both teachers and other students. Riko put forth great effort to approach her instructors and ask advice from them. In most cases, her instructors complied, offering much-needed help in a variety of forms. Riko also used these opportunities to receive instructor feedback. She prepared for her student-teacher writing conferences, seriously considered all the feedback from her instructors and her peers, actively sought feedback when opportunities arose, and tried to implement changes to her academic approach as a result. Rafael was more introverted in this sense. He felt reluctant to ask for help directly from his instructors and, further, did not always consider or sometimes even read the written feedback given to him. He was more willing to ask for and accept feedback from his peers, students with whom he worked for group assignments. Indeed, a regular function of these work groups was to exchange points of view on assignments and to compare answers, both before an assignment was due, and after. Rafael made great use of these encounters, and whether or not he would have benefited from more self-directed interaction with his instructors remains a matter of supposition.

6.1.2 Comparison with other research

Investigating writing is important since it is considered by some to the most advanced language skill students at the tertiary level engage in (Grabe & Kaplan, 1997), though writing is not necessarily as central to the course of academic literacy development from the students’ own points of view (Leki, 2007).
Though many research studies assume the centralized nature of the writing experience within the pursuit for advanced academic literacy (Spack, 1988; Currie, 1993; Riazi, 1997), this study supports how within the context of first-semester undergraduate- and graduate-level studies, participants considered literacy practices of reading and writing within their disciplines more in its function as a gatekeeper (Smith, 1997) than for other purposes. The ability to read and write well for the participants appeared to be a means of evaluating their knowledge of content material, not necessarily as a form of discourse enculturation, nor as a means of improving English language abilities, nor to engage in and personalize their learning.

Arguably, these other potential benefits that result from meaningful contact with academic literacy practices were experienced by the learners, however, participants did not emphasize them in self-reports. These benefits seemed to be a consequence of their learning, rather than the main reason for it. Riko, for example, seemed impressed with the applicability of lessons from her Psychology course to her real life. This is significant, because, as Kahneman (2011) points out, “The test of learning psychology is whether your understanding of situations you encounter has changed, not whether you have learned a new fact” (p. 174). However, these rare instances of a transformation in the understanding of real-life situations were outweighed by the heavy insistence on demonstrating conceptual knowledge of course material on exams, at least as supported by the nervousness and anxiety both Riko and Rafael experienced in regards to their exams. This is arguably for both Riko and Rafael a result of the context of their learning. Later semesters and additional course work will ideally offer ample opportunities for more significant transformational learning.
6.1.3 Explanations for results

The suggested limited role of L2 reading and writing practices in the development of participants’ advanced academic literacy in this one semester of study may be explained considering again the dual-sided nature of literacy dependent on (i) context of learning, and (ii) individual differences.

Context-related issues include the academic community’s expectations for certain literacy practices and opportunities for students to actively engage in the community. Social and cultural expectations in the making of decisions regarding academic literacy and discourse enculturation practices do not always coincide with the expectations L2 students bring with them. In such a situation, L2 students are often classed together with basic L1 writing students to be, according to Bizzell (1987) academic illiterates, defined as “unpracticed in Standard English and inept in ‘critical thinking’” (p. 131, as quoted in Johns, 1990). Bizzell argues that students should not be forced to become a member of a discourse community and that the onus, then, is on academic institutions to adapt to the many cultures of the students, rather than the other way around (Johns, 1990). A second, more feasible approach to this issue is available; however, this will be left for the Conclusions chapter.

Opportunities to engage in disciplinary communities are sometimes insufficient in quantity for L2 students to take proper advantage of. Results from Ferenz (2005) support many of the same
implications of the present study, including that for the process of discourse enculturation students require directed attention in the development of domain-specific academic vocabulary skills, motivation to increase networking skills with peers, instructors, advisors, and other members of the discourse community, and more focused awareness on how to think and write like a member of the field. Without these elements available for students to interact with, it is questionable whether upon completion of their studies they will be full-fledged and competent members of their respective academic communities.

In addition to the above contextual considerations, individual characteristics also had an effect on the development of academic literacy skills for the participants in this study. The variety of literacy histories, prior immersion in other discourse communities, and specific academic literacy instruction provide further insight into how they each responded to the demands of their academic situations.

The diverse literacy histories of the participants affected their present reactions to academic demands. In recognizing the ‘power of words,’ Riko was motivated to continually find better means of precision in written expression, a precision that she recognized as necessary for both her current academic and future professional careers. Rafael had become familiar with his own limitations through his varied schooling experiences, limitations that he learned to accept and perhaps even expect, giving him the confidence that these limitations could be overcome in time. Furthermore, Riko and Rafael benefited from prior immersion in other discourse communities (school, work, English-language programs) and the academic literacy instruction that they
received there, demonstrating the non-linearity of trajectories that directed them to and through university studies.

6.2 Evaluation of the study

The trustworthiness of the results of the study can be evaluated considering: (i) the limitations of the study, and (ii) an evaluation of research methods utilized in the study.

6.2.1 Limitations of the study

The present study is based on two participants through one semester of study. Short-term studies such as this one may make only slight contributions to the accumulation of knowledge in L2 writing (Spack, 1997), since generalizability is limited in a study that is not longitudinal in nature.

However, regarding the generalizability of students’ experiences, I, like Leki (2007), have tried not to “reduce these individual students and their stories to exemplars of a small number of distinct concepts pertinent to language or literacy acquisition, immigrant or international student experiences, or any other principles” (p. 13). The participants’ stories may well reveal common threads of concern for L2 students in general, although the narrations here are meant to speak for themselves rather than to be necessarily extrapolated to the experiences of other ESL students.
An additional limitation may stem from my decision to not speak with any of the participants’ instructors nor carry out participant observations in situ, a decision stemming from my not wanting to draw undue attention to participants in the course of their studies. Spack (1997), for example, discusses the validity of this decision in terms of a participant who suspected her grades having been adjusted upon being identified as the object of a study. My decision, however, limits the scope of data triangulation, the ability to compare perspectives and provide what Eisenhart & Howe (1992) describe as “various explanations to the data at hand and selection of the most plausible one to ‘explain’ the research results” (p. 662).

6.2.2 Evaluation of the methods

The primary source for data in this study was face-to-face interviews over a semester of study. In order to provide additional means of triangulating data beyond participant observation, other data-gathering techniques and resources were utilized, including a collection of all written descriptions of relevant course work (syllabuses and assignment prompts), copies of essays and exams completed by the participants, short email questions and answers with the participants, follow-up, and informal discussions with them about university life in general.

I have attempted to increase the trustworthiness of my data collection and analysis through considerations for an audit trail, member checking (Wolcott, 1992), and data saturation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), common checks on the accuracy of data in qualitative inquiries.
An *audit trail*, providing enough evidence to replicate my lines of inquiry, has been left for other researchers by including reports of data-gathering techniques such as interview format, interview guides, and examples of questions asked, as well as means of data analysis, including *in vitro* coding categories (Richards, 2003) (see Appendix) and the process of data synthesis used (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010).

Having the participants confirm the accuracy of my rendition of their lived experiences provides for *member checking*. This was made possible by follow-up email questions with the participants, informal meetings discussing earlier interviews, and asking the participants to read and comment on their individual narratives.

*Data saturation*, according to Bogdan & Biklen (2007) is a point in analysis where “the information you get becomes redundant” (p. 69). This point was reached in my data analysis by going over the data recursively to ensure that all relevant themes had been captured and then compiling a written narrative of the participants’ stories based on what they said rather than on the researcher’s own interpretations, to the greatest extent possible.

Although it is inevitable that a researcher introduces elements of interpretation into the telling of a narrative, if even by simply limiting the scope of the research to an initial inquiry and choosing which issues to highlight, it should be clear that my primary intent has been to remain as faithful as possible to the participants’ own perceptions of what transpired through their semesters.
6.3 Present state of the field

Atkinson, in Santos et al (2000), regrets that “The study of L2 writing, at least in the field of applied linguistics and TESOL [Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages], is dying before our eyes” (p. 2). Atkinson attributes this demise largely to, at the time, the small number of PhD programs with L2 writing specializations and thus the shrinking number of professionals needed to keep the discipline afloat by training future L2 writing instructors. Silva, in the same compendium (Santos et al, 2000), recognized this argument as valid, pointing out that, although the need for more L2 writing specialists was growing, few TESL graduate programs included course work dedicated to second language writing and few professionals in L1 composition were willing to take on the additional task of dealing with L2 writers. Twelve years after these beliefs were published, taking a look at the present state of the field will help show that these fears may be allayed, and that interest in L2 writing as a field of study appears to be increasing.

Over the last 20 years, certain indicators lend support to how research interest in the field of second language writing as a viable and important area of research is growing (Silva, 1993; Silva & Matsuda, 2002). Between 1990 and 2000, more than 200 doctoral dissertations on L2 writing issues were completed (Silva & Matsuda, 2002), and since 2000 over 400 more (as quoted on the Symposium on Second Language Learning website, 2012). Additionally, the field’s own research journal, the Journal of Second Language Writing, has been in publication since 1992, the sheer number of studies on second language writing overall is immense, as documented in a synthesis
of research by Leki, Cumming & Silva (2008), and a number of PhD programs offer
specializations in L2 writing (Georgia State University, Purdue University, Ontario Institute for
Studies in Education). For the time being, it appears Atkinson’s concerns may be put to rest.
Chapter Seven

Conclusion

7.0 Conclusion

The conclusion of this thesis is in three parts: (i) a restatement and addressing of the research questions that guided the present inquiry; (ii) practical applications and implications in regards to how disciplinary enculturation ideals for both L1 and L2 university students might be addressed; and (iii) recommendations for further research.

7.1 Restatement of research questions

• What different variables play a part in the development of university-level literacy skills?

The results of the present thesis support claims that both contextual factors of study as well as individual characteristics affect the development of advanced academic literacy skills. Contextually, research participants’ expectations for literacy practices, opportunities to engage in disciplinary communities, and learning how to think and write like a member of the field all played significant roles in the experiences that these participants self-reported. Individual characteristics have been shown to include the students’ attitude towards the L2 culture, learner goals, learning strategies, motivation and attitude to learning, and the willingness to take risks.
1) What types of struggles do L2 students encounter regarding written texts, composing processes, and socialization into disciplinary communities?

The participants expressed a variety of successes and setbacks, which at times existed side-by-side, and which must be considered within the larger context of their overall academic study program. Struggles that the participants encountered resulted from a lack of knowledge of or opportunities to gain additional knowledge of content (central ideas of course work), of language systems (especially lexical issues), and of contextual knowledge (ability to act in accordance with discourse conventions). Students displayed fewer difficulties with their composing processes, perhaps as a result of recent IEP training or of previous university studies. These aspects of demonstrating knowledge were especially apparent on exam situations, in which time and novel question-formats played a significant role.

2) To what effect do L2 students use coping strategies to meet the demands of studying as first-semester undergraduate and graduate students?

Results from the present research support that L2 students employ a number of metacognitive, cognitive, and social and affective strategies to help them cope with the challenges of acquiring advanced academic learning skills. Participants reported strategies for dealing with time limitations on exams and for homework, the benefits of interacting with members of the field, particularly instructors, strategies for reading advanced texts, and strategies for handling emotions such as frustration and nervousness. Participants reported that some of these strategies had been carried over from earlier IEP studies.
3) How do the goals that L2 students set help shape their academic literacy experiences?

Goals were set and pursued by both participants through the course of the semester under study. Arguably, specific goals led to the greatest level of academic performance, including the career goal that one participant set to become a social worker. Academic goals helped direct the participants’ attention and efforts in the short-term, providing them with impetus to overcome distracting factors through modifications to their study routines. Different goals necessitated that participants apply varying degrees of effort and search for appropriate strategies to deal with the barriers to success that confronted them.

7.2 Practical applications and implications

Spack (1988) asserts that instruction in domain-specific literacy skills is the obligation of instructors within each field, and that IEP writing instructors and first-year freshman composition teachers should only focus on “general principles of rhetoric and inquiry” (p. 29). Taking such a stance may help define the nature of literacy instruction across many layers of tertiary education, and may provide a means of establishing more efficient pedagogical approaches that foster more effective individual learning styles within specific discourse cultures.

The following recommendations for improving the efficacy of disciplinary initiation is based on Swales (1990) multi-part definition of discourse community. The importance of indoctrinating
students in these discourse conventions has been noted (Casanave, 2004; Santos, 2001; Smith, 1997). For Swales (1990), a discourse community has clear public goals, established means of intra-disciplinary communication, widely-used written and spoken genres, and domain-specific lexis. Within this framework, the following recommendations can be made for university programs that wish to facilitate students’ academic enculturation process.

• Provide more explicit help for students in general and L2 students specifically by making clear the public goals of the discourse community;
• Familiarize students with intra-disciplinary communication practices (journals, conferences);
• Motivate students to participate in these practices, e.g., contributing to journals, attending conferences, networking with peers locally (e.g., group assignments) and at other universities;
• Provide specific and detailed instruction on the written and spoken genres of the field; and,
• Include elements of academic vocabulary training in course work.

For a department whose interests lie in promoting advanced knowledge of these disciplinary expectations, these last two aspects (genre instruction and vocabulary training) could be addressed in a preliminary course specific to the discipline, a course that would be entitled ‘How to think and write like a ............’ (a member of the field, e.g., psychologist, teacher, physicist, mathematician). For undergraduates, this type of course would be a follow-up to the general writing skills practiced in their freshmen composition course, and meant primarily for students (L1 and L2) who have already declared a major. Graduate students in their first year might also benefit from such training. The course might be short-term in nature (half-semester), and, besides
discipline-specific genre analyses and vocabulary training, could include elements of learning strategy instruction, introduction to the prominent journals of the field, regular teacher-student writing conferences for one-to-one guidance and feedback, how to use citations, as well as an introduction to writing for theses and dissertations.

For a department who wishes to begin the process of creating such a course, the following steps could be taken, based on research methodology in L2 writing studies:

i) Categorize writing done within the discipline, making a taxonomy of writing tasks (as did Horowitz, 1986);

ii) Analyze the conceptual activities (task-related thought processes) associated with different courses (Currie, 1993);

iii) Carry out cross-disciplinary studies of composition practices from students’ perspectives, much like Silva (1992) did comparing L1 and L2 writing; and,

iv) Interview L1 and L2 students currently in the specific field to gain their perspectives on course work (like Leki, 2007; Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997; Riazi, 1997; Spack, 1997).

A course design with this groundwork laid would promote a cumulative effect in learning for students, especially for L2 learners who might then progress through the following writing scheme from IEP to advanced course work: (i) Receive instruction in general rhetorical and writing process principles in an EAP program, guided by a specialist in second language acquisition and writing instruction, as recommended by Spack (1988), a course that would help
L2 students understand written prompts typical of university course work as well as become familiar with discipline-specific genres for writing in regular university courses (Currie, 1993); (ii) Take a Freshman composition course to learn the general principles of writing across the curriculum; and, (iii) Take a discourse-specific writing course (either as a second-year undergraduate, or first-year graduate student), with an instructor ideally both an expert in the specific discipline as well as of advanced L1 and L2 writing composition principles.

7.3 Recommendations for further research

The limitations of short-term studies on L2 students’ perceptions of achieving advanced academic literacy have been noted (Leki, 2007; Spack, 1997). These limitations appear especially evident for future research projects which wish to document students’ journey of discourse enculturation, since research on a single semester of study can only provide a tantalizing glimpse of the academic reality for international students. Longitudinal studies that follow students such as Riko and Rafael through the entire course of their academic careers would add significant insight into the interrelationship of their academic struggles, strategies and short- and long-term goals. Qualitative research of this nature directed towards L2 graduate students would be especially beneficial in providing insight into how these students gain the most from their academic pursuits.
Bibliography

8.0 Bibliography


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Appendix

Appendix: Coding categories for data analysis

Reference to English classes

Studying (study habits, time needed, preparing for exams, need to review past material)

Exams (content, types of questions, time allowed, purpose of, teacher and student can disagree, improvement on, different from exams of home country)

Writing (writing assignments, purpose of assignments, writing process, teacher feedback on written work, homework, description of requirements in earlier studies, challenges of, service projects, interference from L1, improvement in, use of model texts, considering different points of view, persuasion, audience, importance of topic, organization of thought, using resources, as learning tool, organization, comparison L1 with L2, register, background knowledge helps)

Courses (content, different from undergraduate studies, status, importance for professional work, importance of for personal life, apply concepts, lots of new information, future)
**Affect** (feelings about professional goals, frustration about exams, pleased, learning from mistakes, failing to understand, accurate reflection of knowledge, surprise about getting correct answer, confidence can do better, confidence to do well, role of motivation to complete studies, nervous, excited, change in attitude, stressed, many responsibilities, difficulties of language)

**Teachers** (corrections, consulting with teachers, conflict with teacher (or of TA), role of teacher in improvement, praise from)

**Reading** (need to read and understand, as learning tool, description of, need to read faster, need to read for gist, background knowledge, strength, attention to organization)

**Other language skills** (listening, note taking, speaking, summarizing in speaking, presentations, relation to other skills, comparing writing and speaking)

**Group work** (group interactions, learning from classmates, compare results, preparing together)

**Socioacademic relations** (receiving support from/comparing experiences with other international students, with other students)

**Control** (strategies, time management, strategizing, using native language to plan, having clear goals, need for more strategies, participation in extra assignments, consulting with academic advisor, need for physical activity, special circumstances for international students)

**Student life** (little time for family/friends, need to do less course work, role of family, meeting students with common culture)

**Background** (reasons for studying, previous studies, home life, job at home)

**Expectations** (group work in future courses, course learning goals, professional, professional goals linked to educational goals, language learning, personal, grades, workload)