Academic Writing and Time Management in a Cultural Context

By Roy Edwards; Yang Xu

Despite having taught on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Business School programmes for many years, the tendency for students from Turkey to China to attempt to complete homework assignments at, or sometimes beyond, the last minute, can still be an exasperating experience. This behaviour can be particularly frustrating in relation to coursework essays. Moreover, regardless of the period of notice provided to some students and the continuous stress on the importance of working steadily through the stages of the writing process, the night before the submission date typically descends into a manic eruption of activity, as students engage in the often forlorn attempt to write directly from the texts in overcrowded computer rooms. Indeed, not only are the critical stages in the writing process leap-frogged, but often not even the minimum time is allowed for basic proofreading.

As a consequence, the work submitted all too frequently reflects a significant level of underachievement for the student, which is often vividly evident in terms of the quality of essay drafts. For example, one Chinese student, frustrated with both his failure to work before the deadline and his subsequent poor grade, expressed his observations in a long email, which is summarised below[1]:

The night before an essay deadline is always the same routine. The computer rooms are packed solid with students. The mood is one of sadness and shame that, once again, everything has been left to the last moment, and we feel that we have failed ourselves and our teachers, while we are all a witness to this collective weakness. However, there is a determination to redeem ourselves and save some face by suffering the punishment of writing overnight in order to finish our

work before the deadline. Now, all that matters is that we produce something to present tomorrow to avoid the final shame of having either to report sick, or offer some other weak excuse in the class, in front of a disbelieving teacher and embarrassed fellow students.

Of course, problems with time management and the tendency to procrastinate is something of a universal human characteristic. However, the freedom, temptations and endless attractive distractions readily on offer to university students, establishes a near perfect environment for the development of creative procrastination skills. In this context, Ariely (2008), in his informative and original book, *Predictably Irrational*, introduces a section on student behaviour with the observation that, 'As a university professor, I'm all too familiar with procrastination' (p. 111). Setting the background scene for a classroom study on procrastination at MIT, he continues his comical observation:

At the beginning of every semester my students make heroic promises to themselves – vowing to read their assign-

[1]*The student gave permission for their comments to be used in this article.*

ments on time, submit their papers on time, and in general, stay on top of things. And every semester I've watched as temptation takes them out on a date, over to the student union for a meeting, and off on a ski trip in the mountains – while their workload falls farther and farther behind. In the end, they wind up impressing me, not with their punctuality, but with their creativity – inventing stories, excuses, and family tragedies to explain their tardiness (Ariely, 2008, p. 111).

In order to investigate this issue further, he provided three of his classes with different criteria for submitting the semester essay assignments. One class was afforded the opportunity to decide the submission dates for the three semester essays. The only condition was that, once each student had announced their submission dates, they would be penalised for each day of late submission. A second group was told that there were no fixed dates for submission, but that all three essays had to be presented by the final day of the semester, or penalties would follow for each day of late entry. The third class was presented with three fixed submission dates for the three essays and was formally warned of the penalties for late submission. After the essays were graded at the end of the semester, it was apparent that the class presented with strict fixed submission dates achieved the highest grade average, followed by the class that were allowed to fix their own dates for submission, while the class with the open-ended contract gained the lowest average grades.

While the above example highlights the universal challenges of time management and prevarication when writing essays, students from some cultures, like China, appear to experience increased difficulties with time management for two main reasons. The first issue arises from the clash between polychronic and monochronic time orientation. More specifically, the universities of the English speaking nations are organisations that operate in a strict monochronic framework, while the majority of Asian students are polychronic in terms of time orientation (Hall, 1983).

First, according to Hall (1959), people operating in a monochronic orientation perceive time as a sequence of events that flow into the past and cannot typically be repeated. Moreover, time is experienced as a series of blocks that can be broken down into minutes and hours that must be strictly managed. As a consequence, those operating in this framework live with a clock constantly ticking in their imagination, accompanied by regular alarm calls warning them to prepare now for the next event. The main monochronic characteristics include a tendency to engage in one activity at a time, adhering religiously to plans, placing emphasis on promptness, an ability to concentrate on the current task, while taking time commitments such as appointments, schedules and deadlines seriously. For example, in relation to a typical university programme, while strict deadlines are imposed for assignments, it is assumed that students are able to plan and manage their own time when prioritising work, analysing tasks, researching topics, conducting background reading and completing tasks, with minimal, if any, supervision.

Table 1. Contrasting Time Orientations (Hall, E.T., & Hall, M.R., 1990)

Monochronic People	Polychronic People
Do one thing at a time	Do many things at once
Concentrate on the job	Are highly distractible and subject to interruptions
Take time commitments (deadlines, schedules) seriously	Consider time commitments an objective to be achieved only if possible
Are low-context and need information	Are high context and already have information
Are committed to the job	Are committed to people
Adhere religiously to plans	Change plans often and easily
Are concerned about not disturbing others; Follow rules of privacy and consideration	Are more concerned with relations (family, friends, close business associates) than with privacy
Show great respect for private property, seldom borrow or lend	Borrow and lend things often and easily
Emphasize promptness	Base promptness on the relationship
Are accustomed to short-term relationships	Have a strong tendency to build lifetime relationships

In contrast, polychronics perceive time as a spiral, in which events can come around more than once, providing the opportunity to change plans and appointments regularly. Such people tend to undertake several tasks at once, are highly distractible, base promptness on relationships, borrow and lend things regularly and are significantly more people-centred than task-focused. The chart below highlights some of the key differences between monochronic and polychronic time orientation.

As a consequence, time orientation has a significant influence on the ways in which students approach time management during the essay writing process. First, as polychronics consider time commitments as broad objectives to be achieved only if possible, time management schedules for the completion of homework tasks, if they exist at all, are typically perceived only as vague aims, which can be frequently altered without causing undue personal stress. In addition, as polychronics place strong emphasis on outcomes and are galvanised to work only at the approach of final submission deadlines, they adopt a flexible approach to the preceding process such as critical reading, summarising, planning and essay outlining, to the point of being regarded as positively reckless from the monochronic perspective. In addition, even in relation to outcomes, priority is given to assignments that are graded. Consequently, tasks such as essay drafts, being part of the process and ungraded, are not typically regarded as important commitments. Indeed, from the perspective of the polychronic student with ever shifting time commitments, serious effort on the task can be reasonably and comfortably delayed until the final essay submission deadline looms.
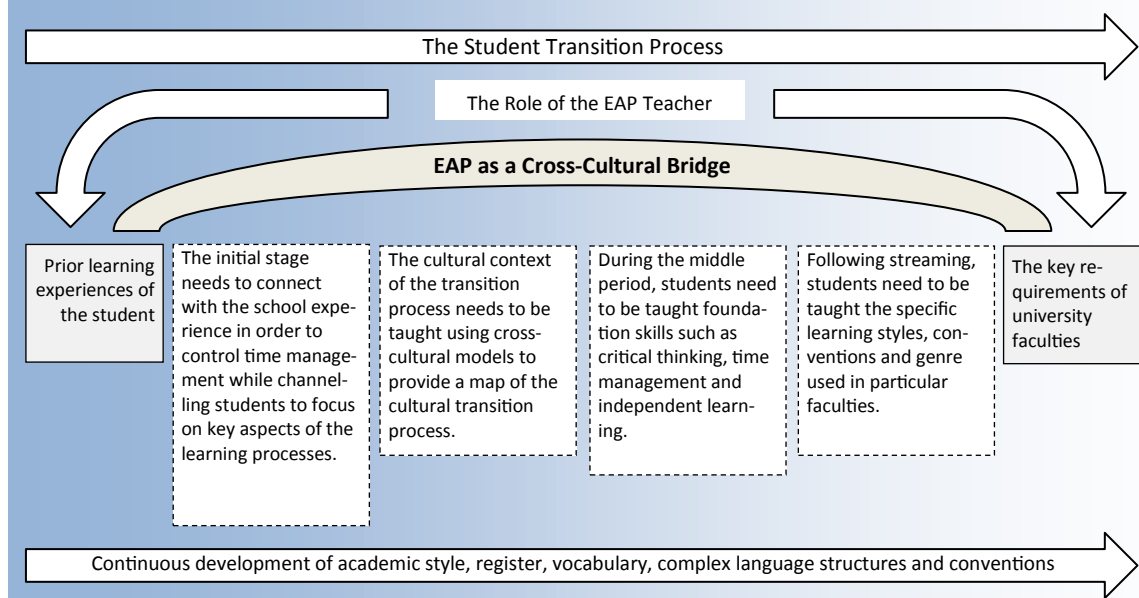
The second reason why some students experience difficulties with time management arises from the extreme contrast between their past experience of education at high school and the learning requirements at university. In order to help examine this issue in more detail, an example of a typical Chinese high school day is shown below, which is based on the experience of one of the authors.

As the example illustrates, there is no space allowed during the school day for the students to develop any independent time management skills. Indeed, in such a teacher-controlled learning environment, there is not even a requirement for the student to manage time, while the opportunity to engage in any form of polychronic behaviour is highly restricted. Moreover, as homework is completed under supervision on the same day it is assigned, students are never exposed to any extended learning process, such as when planning and writing essays.

In contrast, when Chinese students enter international universities, the organisation of the timetable and the learning expectations can appear almost designed to provoke culture shock. From the outset, students are allowed a significant amount of unsupervised space in order to provide opportunities for self-directed learning and personal development, the aim of which is to encourage the student to learn how to learn. However, once outside the classroom, Chinese students often feel lost due to having no prior experience of personal time management, or possessing the skills required for independent learning. For example, one student at XJTLU expressed the frustration of

Table 2. A Typical High School Day for Boarding and Day Students

Boarder Timetable		Day Student Timetable	
5:50-6:00	Wake up	6:00	Wake up
6:30-7:15	Breakfast and morning exercise	6:30	Depart the home
7:15-8:00	Guided morning reviewing class	7:15-8:00	Guided morning reviewing class
8:00-17:00	Classes with two hour lunch and rest	8:00-17:00	Classes with two hour lunch and rest
17:00-19:00	Dinner and sports	18:00	Return home – dinner
19:00-22.30	Homework – supervised and compulsory	19:00-00.00	Start homework under parental supervision
23:00	Lights out	00:00	Go to bed

Figure 1. The EAP Bridging Process

The Student Transition Process

The Role of the EAP Teacher

EAP as a Cross-Cultural Bridge

| Prior learning experiences of the student | The initial stage needs to connect with the school experience in order to control time management while channelling students to focus on key aspects of the learning processes. | The cultural context of the transition process needs to be taught using cross-cultural models to provide a map of the cultural transition process. | During the middle period, students need to be taught foundation skills such as critical thinking, time management and independent learning. | Following streaming, students need to be taught the specific learning styles, conventions and genre used in particular faculties. | The key requirements of university faculties |

Continuous development of academic style, register, vocabulary, complex language structures and conventions

his tutorial group when he announced that the reason why they had not been able to work more on the essays was that there is 'far too much free time' at the international university. As a consequence, Chinese students often comment that, despite the constant pressure to passively memorise for the fiercely competitive national exams, they felt comfortable in the tightly managed school system, in which they received continuous feedback and guidance from teachers.

As a result of the issues discussed above, EAP programmes need to act as a cultural bridge that both restricts the opportunity for students to engage in polychronic behaviour, while teaching practical time management skills that are an essential requirement for successful performance on future faculty courses. While it is important not to be either fixated, or distracted, by particular strategies, certain underlying principles are offered below for debate in relation to the role of EAP programmes as a bridging programme.

- *There is a significant contrast between the domestic high school experience of students and the learning environment at international universities that can result in students initially experiencing culture shock.*
- *The initial stages of the transition process need to connect with the school experience of the students in order to help them manage time while they learn the skills of time management.*
- *As a number of the issues faced by students are directly related to cultural factors, cross-cultural models need to be taught to provide students with an explicit map of their cultural journey.*
- *Many of the important skills required to function successfully at university, such as time management and independent learning, need to be taught in a cultural context on EAP transition programmes.*
- *Later in the programme, students need to be streamed and taught the specific learning styles, conventions and genres that connect with their particular faculty requirements. Indeed, an English language centre is a service provider to faculty, which makes EAP a distinctly different paradigm from general English. This link completes the bridging process and distinguishes the role of university based EAP programmes from language schools.*
- *EAP programmes need to act as a cultural bridge for the students during the transition process.*

In conclusion, this article has explored some of the common cultural issues relating to time management that can create difficulties for Chinese students when attempting to write academic essays during the initial stages of EAP programmes. In this context, this article has examined ways in which the design of a bridging process needs to take into consideration the school experience of the students during the early stage of the transition process, in order to help students develop effective time

management skills. Furthermore, it is also necessary to initially consider approaches to teaching additional generic foundation skills such as critical thinking, research methods, independent learning, team work and project management, which are essential for the successful completion of the journey across the EAP cultural bridge.

References

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