Understanding students' mimicry, emulation and imitation of genre exemplars: An exploratory study

Abstract

Guided by the Vygotskian concepts of *mimicry*, *emulation*, and *imitation*, this study examines how eight Chinese EFL students modeled from genre exemplars when composing their first academic papers in university. The students were enrolled in a "Cultural Tourism Studies" course at a university in south China. The course was delivered in a co-teaching approach with an embedded six-week EAP workshop. Given the short time frame of the workshop, an ESP genre-based approach was adopted, and genre exemplars were used to scaffold the students' understanding of two focal genre features (i.e., citation and organization). At the end of the course, text-based interviews were conducted to understand how the students made sense of and used the genre exemplars in the composing process. The analysis of students' term papers revealed a varying amount of mimicry, emulation, and imitation of the target genre features. The introspective and retrospective accounts of students' engagement with the exemplars suggested that imitative learning was multifaceted, dynamic, and varied within and between individuals. These findings challenge the dichotomous characterization of exemplars as either an enabling scaffold or a constraining shackle. The paper also discusses how the tripartite Vygotskian framework is a useful heuristic for EAP instructors to assess the extent to which genre exemplars are attuned to students' zone of proximal development, and how genre exemplars offer fluid affordances in the process of object-, other-, and self-regulation.

Keywords: genre exemplars; imitative learning; academic writing; imitation; emulation; mimicry

1. Introduction

The ESP genre-based approach has been recognized as effective in professional and academic writing instruction (Cheng, 2008; Hyland, 2007). One of the defining features of this approach is the use of genre exemplars to make textual features visible to learners (Hyland, 2007; Tribble, 2015). In the context of EAP, instructors (and students) collect sample texts of target academic genres. Then, instructors conduct move-step analysis and discourse analysis to familiarize students with the prototypical

genre features (Swales, 1990). Previous studies have demonstrated the advantages of genre exemplars as a powerful mediation tool for students, particularly for novice student writers. One advantage of genre exemplars is their "teachability" (Johns, 1997, p. 118). EAP instructors can tease out lexico-grammatical and structural features, and socialize students into an academic community of practice by increasing their facility with conventional practices in academic genres. For instance, Huang (2014) documented how a Ph.D. student developed his genre knowledge of research articles through the instructor's explicit instruction and the student's self-regulated analysis of three sample articles. Another advantage of genre exemplars is their "followability" (Macbeth, 2010, p. 45). Cheng's (2007, 2008, 2011) studies demonstrated that students were able to perform rhetorical, evaluative and linguistic analysis of sample articles, and transfer the genre features to their own writing. For students, genre exemplars are accessible and understandable, and represent a promise of delivering desired outcomes.

Because of these benefits, among others, modeling from exemplars is routinely practiced in class (Wette, 2014) and identified as one of students' learning strategies (Leki, 1995; Tardy, 2006). However, there are concerns that exemplars may reduce student writing to mere mimicry and constrain their reflexivity and creativity. For example, exemplars may imply that only standard practices are accepted (Norton, 2004) and students would uncritically replicate or even plagiarize from the model texts (Handley & Williams, 2011). Given the potential benefits and constraints, it is necessary to understand how students use exemplars in their composing process. Unfortunately, the existing research offers relatively little information about students' interaction with genre exemplars (Cheng, 2006, 2008). We are still not very clear about students' perception, interpretation, and application of genre exemplars. To address this gap, this paper focuses on how novice student writers make sense of and use genre exemplars when composing their first academic papers in university. In the following sections, I will first explain three Vygotskian concepts: *imitation*, *emulation*, and *mimicry*. Guided by this theoretical framework, I will then report on an exploratory study examining students' imitative learning patterns and processes. Based on the research findings, I will discuss the multifaceted and dynamic nature of imitative learning and the heuristic values of the tripartite framework for EAP instructors to understand students' engagement with exemplars.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Zone of proximal development, scaffolding, and imitation

In the sociocultural theory of learning, cognitive development is understood as a social-psychological process meditated by both physical and symbolic tools (Vygotsky, 1978; 1987). Learning begins as a social (inter-mental) process and evolves as a psychological (intra-mental) process (Lantolf, 2012; Stone, 1993). To facilitate learning, experts or more capable peers provide support to help learners perform tasks which cannot be achieved by learners alone. The support in learners' apprenticeship is called scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). More importantly, for scaffolding to be effective, it needs to take place in learners' zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the gap between what individuals can achieve with and without assistance (Vygotsky, 1978). Both the ZPD and scaffolding are important in the learning process that evolves from other-mediation to self-internalization.

Imitation is crucial to achieve internalization. For Vygotsky, imitation is not mindless copying of actions (1997) but presupposes conscious understanding of the structural relations in a problem that is being solved (1987). Importantly, "the child can imitate only what lies within the zone of his intellectual potential" (1987, p. 209). If the scaffolding is outside the ZPD of the child, s/he will not be able to model from the expert or the more capable peer. Therefore, imitation is a powerful means to assess the ZPD of a given child:

> by testing the limits of possible imitation, we test the limits of the intellect of [a] given [child]…If we want to learn how much a given intellect has matured for one function or another, we can test this by means of imitation. (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 96)

A recent development of Vygotsky's concept of *imitation* is to distinguish three levels of conscious understanding of the goals and means of an action, thereby creating three related concepts: *imitation*, *emulation* and *mimicry* (see Lantolf, 2006; Tomasello, 1999). *Imitation* is undergirded by an individual's ability to understand how the means is used to accomplish the goal, while *emulation* indexes an individual's recognition of the goal but his/her inability to understand the means. *Mimicry* is blindly copying from a model without understanding its intended goal. Framed from this means-and-goals (de)coupling, it is useful to differentiate true learning (represented by *imitation*) from partial learning (represented by *emulation*) and pseudo learning (represented by

mimicry).

2.2 Scaffolding and imitative learning in EAP writing

Genre exemplars are recognized as important artifacts to scaffold students in EAP writing instruction. However, compared to the bulk of research focusing on the pedagogical utility of model texts, student engagement with genre exemplars has received relatively little attention (Cheng, 2006, 2008). In the Vygotskian approach to learning, scaffolding is a fluid, intersubjective process (Stone, 1993). If we separate external scaffolding from students' internal uptake, we are unable to know whether students' development benefits from their interaction with exemplars. The three aforementioned Vygotskian concepts are particularly pertinent to understand student engagement with genre exemplars in their composing process. With levels of conscious understanding as the classification criteria, the concepts evoke a processual perspective of students' imitative learning. Do they mimic surface textual features in exemplars without understanding their functional significance? Do they emulate textual features with full knowledge of the intended functions but little knowledge of how these and other alternative features can achieve the purposes? Or do they engage in (transformative) imitation of these features and effectively communicate their own research? This layered perspective allows for a richer understanding of students' agency and intentionality in their engagement with genre exemplars (Tardy, 2006). Additionally, by examining the imitative learning process, instructors can gauge whether genre exemplars reside in students' ZPD and ascertain the mediating effect of exemplars.

3. The study

3.1 Research questions

To gain a deeper understanding of imitative learning of genre exemplars, this study was guided by the following questions:

1) Do novice student writers mimic, emulate or imitate the genre features in the exemplars?
2) How do they perceive and use genre exemplars to mediate the process of composing their first term papers?
3) What are possible factors that lead to their imitative patterns and processes?

3.2 Context and participants

This study involved 44 EFL (English as a foreign language) students majoring in International Tourism and Convention at a university in south China. For the first two years, the students were exposed to intensive training of four English language skills. By the end of the second year, their English proficiency could be placed at the B2 level of the CEFR. For the third and fourth years, they took eight domain-specific courses. At the time of the study, the students were in the first semester of their third-year program, and were enrolled in a "Cultural Tourism Studies" course, delivered in an embedded co-teaching approach (Murray, 2015; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). The course was taught by two instructors and divided into three parts: theoretical discussion, case studies, and an embedded EAP workshop. The first two parts (lasting 14 weeks) were delivered by a content specialist and alternated as an adjacency pair: one week was spent on explaining a cultural tourism theory and the subsequent week focused on case studies applying the theory. In the final six weeks, as an EAP instructor, I curated the writing workshop to prepare students for their term papers. It is important to note that the term paper was the first (English or otherwise) academic paper produced by the student cohort.

The design of the embedded EAP workshop was based on present and target situation analyses (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Before the workshop, the students and the content specialist responded to an open-ended survey, which was designed to understand students' perceived difficulties for writing their first academic papers (see Appendix A). The content specialist and I jointly analyzed the responses and identified two major difficulties: citation and organization. As our primary goal was to scaffold the students to produce their first academic papers, we decided to follow ESP genre-based pedagogy and Johns' (2011) advice to focus on the textual features when training novice writers. Given the short time frame of the EAP workshop, the content specialist provided me three sample articles and I enacted explicit instruction to demystify the conventions of the academic genre (Hyland, 2004; Hyon, 2001, 2017). Table 1 summarizes the contents of the EAP workshop.

Table 1
Contents of the EAP writing workshop.

Session	Topic	Material
1	APA in-text citation (1)	Literature review section in the sample articles
2	APA in-text citation (2)	Data analysis section in the sample articles
3	APA reference list	Reference list in the sample articles
4	Organization (1): Introduction	Introduction section in the sample articles
5	Organization (2): Research context	Literature review and research design sections in the sample articles
6	Organization (3): Data analysis and conclusion	Data analysis and conclusion sections in the sample articles

In the workshop, the students read the selected sections of the sample articles. Then, they were introduced to the skills of citing sources and organizing a paper. Specifically, when citation was discussed, the students and I paused at every citation and analyzed how quotations were formatted (based on Swales' [1990] distinction of integral and non-integral citations) and what rhetorical functions were achieved (based on Petrić's [2007] topology).[1] When organization was discussed, we paused after every paragraph and discussed how rhetorical moves/steps were made (Swales, 1990). After the consciousness-raising instruction, the students worked as a group doing text production exercises (Hyon, 2017). At the end of each EAP session, the students were given ten minutes to raise any questions and concerns. Of particular note is that they repeatedly and explicitly asked two questions: "How many sources do we need to cite in the term paper?" "Can you provide a paper template for us to follow?" At first, the content specialist and I were hesitant to meet their requests. However, as Bruner (1981) argues, reducing the degree of freedom and limiting the complexity of the task are two important elements in expert scaffolding. Additionally, providing a genre template is considered a useful way to scaffold student writing (Hyland, 2007). Therefore, after deliberation, we constructed a template with a four-move structure and a minimum-five-source requirement (see Appendix B). The students were explicitly told that the template was only a suggestion. They could follow other organizational patterns and were encouraged to cite more than five sources in their term papers. As exemplars are typical examples to "illustrate dimensions of quality and clarify assessment expectations" (Carless & Chan, 2017, p. 930), in this study, genre exemplars are broadly defined as "[m]odel texts, skeletal or otherwise," (Macbeth, 2010, p. 45) that elucidate

conventions and assessment expectations pertaining to the target genre. In this sense, the three sample articles and the skeletal outline are considered genre exemplars, because they specify genre conventions and assessment expectations of citation and organization in the term paper.

At the end of the course, the students submitted their term papers for grading. The content specialist and I used a maximum variation method (Patton, 2002) to select eight students, representative of the larger population in the course, on the basis of the quantitative measures (e.g., the numbers of in-text citations and sources in the reference list) and the qualitative measures (see Appendix C for the grading criteria for the term paper). To allow free expression of their genuine thoughts, the students were not approached until their course grades were finalized in the university's course management system. They all consented to be interviewed and became the participants of this study.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Before the interview, I carefully read the students' term papers and focused on citation and organization, two themes addressed in the EAP workshop. For citation, I marked up and tallied all the instances of in-text citations and sources cited in the reference lists. For organization, inspired by Lin and Evans (2012), I focused on the headings and subheadings. I found that the students recycled all the headings and subheadings in the template except in the *Data Analysis* section. Therefore, I decided to focus on and mark up the subheadings in this section. After this, I prepared a list of questions for each student (see Appendix D for an example of the interview outline). The text-based interview was divided into three parts. In the first part, the students were presented their marked-up term papers. For each instance of the in-text citations and subheadings, they were asked to point out the source they modeled from. They were then prompted to explain whether they understood the *why* and *how* of the textual features. In the second part, they explained why they cited sources and organized the subheadings the way they did in the term papers. In the third part, they reported how they used the exemplars when drafting the term papers. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and transcribed verbatim. The extracts cited in this paper were translated by me and checked by a colleague with 15 years of teaching EAP at the same institute.

Data analysis was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, all the instances of in-

text citations and subheadings were categorized as *mimicry*, *emulation* or *imitation* based on the students' verbal reports of the composing process. For instance, in Extract 1 (see below), Lam, Lee, and Woo (all pseudonyms) modeled from the same citation form in the first sample article. Lam confessed in the interview: "Actually, I was not sure why the author used 'noted'…but I thought it was a good sentence pattern to introduce a quote, so I used it in my term paper." Because Lam did not understand the rhetorical function of the reporting verb, his citation practice was categorized as *mimicry*. On the contrary, Lee demonstrated her understanding of the rhetorical purpose of the reporting verb: "I know when we want to present a neutral stance, we can use 'note that' to refer to someone's findings." However, she was not sure about how the reporting verb was associated with neutrality: "Honestly, I don't know how 'note that' is different from 'propose that.' I just force myself to remember to use 'note that' when I want to be neutral." This shows that Lee emulated the formulae expression with her understanding of the intended function but little knowledge of how the intended function was achieved. As such, her citation practice was categorized as *emulation*. By comparison, Woo had a more sophisticated understanding of using reporting verbs to mark her stance:

> The verb 'noted' means objectively taking note of what the author says, without committing to the author's argument…When we are sure of our ground, we may use something like 'contend that.' But here, I don't want to make commitment, so I used a value-neutral phrase 'noted that'.

Woo's citation practice was categorized as *imitation* because she demonstrated knowledge of using citation to communicate her own research, suggesting internalization of the functions and forms of reporting verbs in her composing process.

Extract 1

> **Sample article #1:** Warde and Martens (1998) noted that eating out, from a broader perspective, greatly increases tourists' satisfaction…
>
> **Lam's mimicry:** Rabbiosi (2013) noted that "the history of the mid-nineteenth century commercial revolution and luxury fashion are embedded in the city's physical forms as well as in its sense of place…"
>
> **Lee's emulation**: Philip Kotler (2003) noted that facilitating products are services or goods that must be present for the guest to use core product.

Woo's imitation: Scarpato (2002) noted that food satisfies all the conventional requirements of cultural tourism products.

Following this classification criteria, the aforementioned EAP colleague and I independently coded all the in-text citations and subheadings as instances of *mimicry*, *emulation*, or *imitation*. We then met and resolved differences through discussion. After that, I tallied the frequency of the codes to establish the profiles of student engagement with the exemplars, thereby addressing the first research question.

In the second stage, the same colleague and I independently performed thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. To address the second and third research questions, we grouped different extracts of verbal reports into three categories: (a) perception of the exemplars, (b) use of the exemplars, and (c) reasons thereof. We then compared our categories and formulated coherent processes and reasons leading up to the students' *mimicry*, *emulation*, and *imitation*.

4. Results

4.1. Students' imitative learning profiles

The students' imitative patterns are rather complex (see Table 2) but can be unpacked in two ways. First, all of them attempted or enacted imitation when composing their first academic papers. However, all of them also enacted mimicry of genre exemplars without truly understanding the means and goals of the textual features. Second, some students (Lam, Fong, Lee and Tsai) attempted imitation but changed back to emulation, while some others (Cheung, Kwok, Wong, and Woo) performed both emulation and imitation. Based on the patterns shown in Table 2, it could be surmised that student engagement with the genre exemplars was multifaceted and dynamic. The following subsections will illustrate this finding in greater detail.

Table 2
Profiles of students' imitative learning

Pseudonym	# of sources in the reference list	Citations (# of instances)	Subheadings
Lam	1	Mimicry (4)[a]	Imitation→ Emulation [b]
Fong	3	Mimicry (2); Imitation (1)→Emulation (4)	Mimicry
Cheung	5	Mimicry (4); Emulation (1)	Imitation

Lee	5	Mimicry (2); Imitation (1)→Emulation (3)	Imitation→ Emulation
Tsai	6	Mimicry (3); Emulation (3); Imitation (1)	Imitation→ Emulation
Kwok	6	Mimicry (2); Emulation (5); Imitation (2)	Imitation
Wong	11	Mimicry (2); Emulation (6); Imitation (3)	Emulation
Woo	13	Mimicry (1); Emulation (11); Imitation (3)	Imitation

[a] The numbers in the brackets indicate the instances of mimicry, emulation or imitation in the in-text citations. As students might cite the same source multiple times, the sum of the mimicry, emulation and imitation might be larger than the number of sources cited in the reference list.
[b] The arrow indicates that the student tried imitation but changed back to emulation.

4.2 Number of sources cited

As explained in Section 3.2, the students were required to cite at least five sources in their term papers. Four of them cited five or fewer. In the interviews, they were asked why they cited a limited amount of sources. They alluded to two reasons, both of which showed that they did not understand the rhetorical purposes of citations. First, they unthinkingly conformed to the minimum-five target and mimicked what was suggested in the template. For instance, Lam flatly stated: "I quote, because I have to. I have to come up with five sources in the reference list." This was echoed by Tsai: "When I hit the [minimum-five] target, I felt like the citation task was completed." Second, rather surprisingly, some students believed that citing sources would crowd out their own voices: "If I have more citations, I'll have less space for my own opinions" (Lee) and "citations squeezed out my viewpoints…it's hard to keep a balance" (Cheung). As they were locked in this zero-sum belief, they stopped citing sources when they met the minimum target.

For the four students who cited more than five sources, they were prompted to comment on the minimum-five target. All of them used it *post hoc* not *a priori*: "I focused on citing the sources relevant to my arguments…when I finished drafting the paper, I found that I had already over-delivered the target" (Wong). Similarly, Woo recounted how she used the minimum target to check rather than dictate her writing: "I didn't think about the minimum requirement when I was writing. I focused on comparing evidence from related sources…after I finished my draft, I checked whether my citations met the requirement." These four students were able to perceive the

instructors' intention of providing the minimum-five target as "a bottom line not a finishing line of citing resources" (Kwok). They also demonstrated knowledge of using citations to develop their arguments in their term papers (Wingate, 2012), instead of mindlessly replicating the practice of citing five sources required in the template.

4.3 Citations

Four students (Lam, Fong, Cheung, and Lee) had no instance of imitation of citations in their term papers (see Table 2). They alluded to two reasons in the interviews. First, they simply mimicked what appeared to them the most transparent and frequent citation form (i.e. non-integral citation), but they failed to explain what rhetorical effect it achieved. For instance, Cheung confessed in her interview: "putting authors' names in brackets is the easiest way for me." Likewise, Lam remarked that "I found quoting names in brackets very common in the sample articles, so I just followed it."

Second, some students (Fong and Lee) actually attempted imitation, but gave up because of their inability to judge its appropriateness. For instance, Fong tried to imitate an integral citation in Sample Article #2 in order to "give an authoritative touch to the argument by foregrounding the author," but she decided against it (see also Extract 2):

> I found it hard to know whether the embedded citation was grammatically correct…When I modeled from the sample article, I noticed that the tense was inconsistent: 'suggested' and 'are'; 'concluded' and 'has.' My previous writing teachers always stressed verb tense agreement in the same sentence. So I changed back to the simplest way, using brackets, to attribute information to the author. This would avoid the issue of tense disagreement.

Fong's non-integral citation in Extract 2 was categorized as emulation because she understood that "foregrounding the author" could enhance the strength of an argument but her beliefs about appropriate grammatical patterns prevented her from enacting a viable means to achieve this purpose.

Extract 2

> **Sample Article #2**: Hofstede (1980) himself <u>suggested</u> that some cultural dimensions <u>are</u> more influential than others in specific situations.
>
> **Fong's attempted imitation**: Downes (1997) <u>concluded</u> that the Schengen agreement <u>has</u> a profound effect on the prosperity of tourism.

Fong's emulation: The Schengen agreement has a profound effect on the prosperity of tourism (Downes, 1997).

The other four students (Tsai, Kwok, Wong, and Woo) had a varying amount of mimicry, emulation, and imitation of citations. The interviews revealed three interesting findings. First, even if a citation product was reminiscent of the model, it might be a mimicry that suggested pseudo learning on the part of the students. In other words, even though two students reproduced similar textual features, they might suggest different levels of learning (pseudo vs. true). For example, as shown in Extract 3, at face value, both Tsai and Kwok successfully reproduced multiple citations. However, Tsai simply copied from the model because she "thought it was cool to have multiple citations in one bracket." She added that she "had not read any of these sources but copied from secondary sources." By comparison, Kwok had developed sophisticated knowledge about multiple citations: "I cited these sources to show the argument is an established fact endorsed by multiple scholars. I also used the phrase 'has long been recognized' to boost the strength of the argument."

Extract 3

Sample Article #3: Indeed, cultural differences have been suggested as a possible reason why consumers and managers in different countries make different decisions (Arora & Fosfuri, 2000; Kacen & Lee, 2002; Soutar, Grainger, & Hedges, 1999; Tahir & Larimo, 2004).

Tsai's mimicry: The perceptions of privacy has been found to vary across individuals and cultures (Altman, 1977; Laufer & Wolfe, 1977; Kiran, 2009).

Kwok's imitation: Authenticity-seeking has long been recognized as a key motivator in tourism experiences (Cohen, 1988; Cole, 2007; Hughes, 1995; Wang, 1999).

The second noteworthy point is that a flawed reproduction might not mean zero learning, but rather the form-function decoupling, or partial learning, of a textual feature. In Extract 4, Tsai emulated a phrase *as cited in* to indicate the citation of a secondary source. She understood the purpose of this practice but confused the means: "I use *as cited in* to show I cannot locate the original source…I read the secondary source on

page 23 of the journal *Issues in Cultural Tourism Studies*, so I referenced it."

Extract 4

Sample Article #1: According to the Taipei City Government's Market Committee (Wang, 2000, as cited in Yang, 2000), over 60% of the vendors sell food and drinks.

Tsai's emulation: Cultural tourism can therefore be seen as "covering both 'heritage tourism' (related to artefacts of the past) and 'arts tourism' (related to contemporary cultural production)." (as cited in Issues in Cultural Tourism Studies. 2003. p. 29)

The third finding is that even though a textual product may not be an exact replica of the model, it might be a transformative imitation that suggests true learning. For example, in Extract 5, Wong creatively reproduced the middle-positioned citation to achieve a particular rhetorical effect and demonstrated her sophisticated knowledge of using a new phrase to achieve the intended effect:

> When I read the second sample article, I like the parenthetical phrase "as noted by." It makes the flow very natural. If you use "Yavas (1990) noted that…" you will start a new sentence and break the flow. Also, the parenthetical phrase can foreground the argument…In my term paper, I used another parenthetical phrase "as put forward by" to evoke this style.

Extract 5

Sample Article #2: Hofstede offered that differences in uncertainty avoidance are potentially the most significant cultural dimension in international settings…, and, as noted by Yavas (1990), risk is a major concern for international travellers.

Wong's imitation: More importantly, as put forward by Johnson (1991), corporate culture and environment are of greater importance in that a sense of belonging and passion will be inculcated in employees' mind.

4.4 Subheadings

In the interviews, all the participants agreed that the genre template helped them organize their term papers, confirming that predetermined essay structure was a useful

scaffolding tool (Cotterall & Cohen, 2003). However, in the process of composing their term papers, they perceived and used the template rather differently. For instance, Fong mimicked all the subheadings in the template, and did not try to model from the subheadings in the sample articles. When asked why he privileged the template over the sample articles, he replied that the subheadings in the template "are customized for the term paper…I can deliver what the instructors want by following the template." This response was somewhat surprising because in the workshop the students were explicitly told that the template was one possible way to structure their papers, and they could use other organizational patterns suitable to their research cases.

For Lam, Lee, Tsai and Wong, they emulated the subheadings in the template. They realized that the subheadings ("Dimension 1," "Dimension 2" and "Dimension 3") in the template were to help them analyze/present their findings in several aspects: "I understand the goal is to organize the paper in several parts" (Wong). However, they thought the move-step structure was "fragmented" (Tsai) and "changing the structure might change the logic I was not aware of" (Wong). Actually, in the EAP workshop, I had explained the relation between the (sub)sections in the term paper. Despite this, Wong contended:

> I seemed to understand how different parts were connected in the workshop. But when I actually wrote the paper, I felt like I was filling in blanks one by one. Like the template was a large form, and I wrote down my answer in each section.

Wong's comment resonates with the observation made by Hendry, White, and Herbert (2016): even though the students developed a writing concept from engagement with the exemplars, they might still struggle to apply their understanding in the imitative learning process.

Unlike Wong, three students (Lam, Lee and Tsai) had actually attempted imitation but changed back to emulation for two reasons. First, they were uncertain about the appropriateness of their own creations. For instance, Lam tried to use his research questions as the subheadings, but eventually gave up:

> I tried to structure my data analysis by my research questions, so I used them as subheadings, such as 'How does a city make the most suitable orientation development for its tourism industry?'. I found that it was too long and I was not sure if this was allowed…I tried to come up with shorter subheadings, but

I couldn't, so I used the subheadings in the paper template instead.

When asked whether he had read any article that used research questions as subheadings, he confessed, "The three sample articles were all I had read…none of them used research questions as subheadings. And the headings and subheadings were short. So I had no confidence in doing that." The limited exposure to research conventions offered few resources for Lam to make an informed judgement of his own creations, so he had to adopt the subheadings in the template.

Second, when some students compared the sample articles with the template, the perceived discrepancy led to their wholesale acceptance of the latter. For instance, Lee described her confusion about how the *Data Analysis* section should be organized:

> In the first sample article, all the findings are presented under the heading *Results*. There are no subheadings. I think my term paper is more like this scenario…I have only one point to convey. I tried to imitate this no-subheading practice…But in the template, three subheadings are provided to organize our findings.

In the interview, I asked whether she realized that even though no subheadings were used in the sample article, the paragraphs were logically organized by statistical methods. She replied that:

> I noticed this and tried to organize my findings by different tourist groups…But I changed my mind, and stuck to the template subheadings…the template was provided by the instructors, so [it] was the most authoritative. Any digression from it might risk making a mistake.

Once again, Lee's interview extracts show that the students attached much more importance to the template than the instructors intended them to. In doing so, they replaced a cognitive judgement (whether the exemplar was functionally and formally appropriate for them to model from) with a value judgement (whether the exemplar was authoritative to model from).

For Cheung, Kwok and Woo, they were able to imitate the subheadings and treated the template as a general recipe: "you need to change some ingredients to suit your flavor/paper" (Kwok). That was why "I added my research content into the subheadings in the *Data Analysis* section" (Woo). Cheung described how she created and re-arranged the subheadings, using the template as a thinking tool to guide her imitation:

> Based on the template, I understood we needed to present the findings in

several categories. Then I asked myself how many categories there were in my findings.…When I wrote down the answers as subheadings,…such as 'Tourists' complaints,' 'Tourist's motivations,' and 'Travel agency's arrangement' I found the order didn't make chronological sense, so I put 'Tourists' complaints' at the end.

5. Discussion

5.1 Multifaceted imitative learning

The existing literature has tended to adopt a dichotomous view of exemplars as either an enabling scaffold or a constraining shackle. Genre exemplars are enabling because they make tacit knowledge visible and manageable for novice student writers (Hyland, 2007). They are constraining because these transparent features are readily replicable (Handley & Williams, 2011) even though students do not fully understand the *why* or *how*. However, transcending the dichotomy, this study shows that imitative learning is multifaceted and can be differentiated into three levels: pseudo, partial, and true. Such differentiation corresponds to a Vygotskian distinction between *mimicry*, *emulation*, and *imitation* (see Lantolf, 2006). As a useful heuristic, this tripartite framework provides greater insight into the multi-layered imitative processes and enables EAP instructors to determine the extent to which students have internalized the target genre features. For example, in Extract 1 (integral citation) and Extract 3 (multiple citations), although the students' reproductions are deceptively similar to each other and to the sample articles, they essentially represent different levels of understanding/learning of using citations to communicate the students' research. If EAP instructors do not delve deeper into the differentiated levels of conscious understanding, we may feel content with the students' textual products that bear close resemblance to the target genre forms. Using close resemblance as evidence of learning is likely to be misleading, because students may simply mimic the textual features without actually acquiring the genre skills (Hendry et al., 2016).

Another piece of evidence that points to the multifaceted nature of imitative learning is that the mediating effect of the exemplars varied *intra*-individually and *inter*-individually. Intra-individual differences mean that the individual students were more able to internalize one genre feature than the other, thereby producing varying instances of mimicry, emulation, and imitation (see also Table 2). For instance, Cheung

was able to imitate the subheadings, but had to mimic and emulate the citation forms. Inter-individual differences mean that the students used the exemplars rather differently to mediate their composing processes. As reported in Section 4.2, Lam, Fong, Cheung and Lee used the minimum-five-source requirement as an *a priori* goal to dictate their citation practices, while Tsai, Kwok, Wong, and Woo used it as a *post hoc* guide to check whether their writing met the requirement. Taken together, student engagement with the genre exemplars is rather complex and individualized (Cheng, 2006, 2008; Wang, 2017). A processual perspective, guided by the tripartite Vygotskian framework, can allow EAP instructors to get closer to the complexity and individuality of student interaction with exemplars (more on this in Section 6).

5.2 *Dynamic imitative learning*

The distinction between three levels of imitative learning also allows EAP instructors to gain insight into the dynamic imitative process. For some instructors, genre exemplars are perceived as containers of knowledge and skills, which can be transmitted to students through explicit instruction and imitative reproduction. However, if we do not lose sight of the key function (i.e., mediation) of genre exemplars, we realize that internalization of genre practices is not without complication (Cheng, 2011; Macbeth, 2010) because mediation is first and foremost an intersubjective and transactional process, not a transmission process. As this study shows, the mediating effect of the exemplars was sometimes unsuccessful and constrained by three factors. First, although the exemplars made the students aware of the rhetorical purposes of some genre practices, their English proficiency inhibited their imitation. As shown in Extract 4, Fong's attempt to imitate an integral citation was unsuccessful because she believed that it was incorrect to use multiple verb tenses within a sentence. She then used an avoidance strategy and enacted a non-integral citation to ensure grammar accuracy. Second, as the students were first-time writers of academic papers, they were unfamiliar with the genre conventions, which would otherwise be valuable resources to substantiate their imitation (Hyland, 2004; Johns, 2008). For instance, Lam tried to transform the subheadings in the template and use his research questions as subheadings in the *Data Analysis* section. However, Lam's limited exposure to academic conventions made him worry about the legitimacy of this practice. Like Fong, he enacted an avoidance strategy and replicated the template subheadings, instead of using

his own creations. Third, perhaps most unexpectedly, student perception of the power imbalance between exemplars swayed their judgement of which one to model from. When reproducing subheadings, Fong completely disregarded the sample articles, because following the template would "deliver what the instructors want." As for Lee, she read the sample articles and noticed that no subheadings were used in one article. Although she endorsed and wanted to imitate this no-subheading practice, she soldiered on and chose to emulate the template's subheadings instead. She reasoned that the template was constructed by the course instructors, hence its superior authority.

5.3 *Mediating effect of genre exemplars*

In Vygotskian sociocultural theory, learning is an internalization process from external mediation to internal regulation. Imitation is fundamental to the internalization process and a useful lens to examine whether learning takes place within an individual's ZPD (Vygotsky, 1998). For imitation to be possible and successful, "there are maturing psychological functions that are insufficient to support independent performance, yet are developed sufficiently to take advantage of [external mediation]" (Lidz & Gindis, 2003, p. 102). Applied in this research context, the differentiation of mimicry, emulation, and imitation sheds valuable light on the mediating effect of exemplars. For instance, Lam and Tsai's impoverished view of citing sources to fulfil the minimum-five-source requirement, and Lee and Cheung's zero-sum belief about in-text citations and their own voices clearly showed that the exemplars were outside their ZPDs and failed to scaffold them to understand the rhetorical purposes of citing sources.

Another valuable finding is about the differentiated *affordances* of the exemplars in the process of object-, other- and self-regulation. As Wertsch (1979) argues, individuals move through three developmental stages in which they are first mediated by the objects in the environment, then by the adults who help them achieve the task, and finally develop their self-control over goal-directed behaviors (see also Lantolf, 2000). Previous studies have explored students' self-regulation in their engagement with genre exemplars (e.g., Cheng, 2007, 2008) and the effect of other-regulation through explicit instruction (e.g., Huang, 2014). In common with this line of research, this study contributes to a richer understanding of the fluid (and perhaps conflicting) mediational roles of genre exemplars. In Wong's case, the template was part of the instructor's explicit instruction (i.e., other-regulation) which helped her understand how

an academic paper was structured. However, when she composed her term paper, she failed to see the underlying relation between different sections and regarded the template as a large form to be filled in. At this point, the role of the same template became object-regulated, distracting Wong from seeing the structural connection. On the contrary, Cheung was able to move from other-regulation to self-regulation. She understood the *why* and *how* of the template in the EAP workshop and then used it to mediate her decision-making in the wording and ordering of subheadings in her term paper. The discrepancy between Wong's and Cheung's cases demonstrates that the mediational roles of the exemplars were not fixed or discrete. In sociocultural terms, although the genre exemplars had the same properties, they had different *affordances* perceived and acted upon by the students (see van Lier, 2000; Lantolf, 2006). If the students did not interact with certain affordances in a way that enhanced their genre repertoire, they might not be able to recognize these affordances next time they saw them. Instead, they might perceive and act upon other affordances, such as Wong using the genre template as a form of object-regulation. However, as in Cheung's case, if the students internalized the genre practices afforded by the instructor's other-regulation, they would be able to recognize the same affordances of the exemplars and act upon them to self-regulate their composing process. This might explain why the mediating effect of the exemplars varied in the process of object-, other- and self-regulation.

6. Pedagogical implications

Although modeling from genre exemplars has been well documented as a regular learning and teaching strategy (Tardy, 2006; Wette, 2014), this study sheds light on the complexity of the imitative learning process and points to three pedagogical implications in using genre exemplars.

First, given the multifaceted and dynamic nature of imitative learning, there is a need to map performance on to (meta)cognitive process when assessing student learning in academic writing. As this study shows, the composing process is much more complex and dynamic than what is presented in the term papers. Some students attempted imitation but reverted back to emulation because they were not sure of the appropriateness of their own creations. Can we discount this reflexivity and dismiss it as a parroting practice? Additionally, although some students reproduced the desired textual features, they were actually motivated by perfunctory genre knowledge. Can we

take comfort in reading the target-like textual products and assume that they have mastered the genre practices? In the sociocultural theory of learning, "development is not only about improvements in performance but also about control over the performance" (Lantolf, 2012, p. 60). Therefore, students' introspective and retrospective accounts are important for EAP instructors to assess whether and to what extent students take control over their performance. We need to update our assessment tools to better elicit evidence of students' cognitive and metacognitive development in academic writing. One such tool is a portfolio that requires students to provide annotated versions of genre exemplars (Cheng, 2007, 2008), drafts of the term paper, and their reflection on the metacognitive process about mimicking, emulating or imitating genre features. These documents allow for a fuller understanding of how students make sense of and use genre exemplars to improve their academic writing performance and their control over the performance.

Second, to facilitate the internalization process of moving from being object- and other-regulated to being self-regulated, the quantity and quality of scaffolding must be attuned to students' ZPDs (Lantolf, 2012; Vygotsky, 1987). How many and what kinds of exemplars are needed to enable students to interact with the inherent affordances in a way that builds genre knowledge and skills? When do instructors offer explicit instruction and gradually withdraw (textual) scaffolding, thereby empowering students to independently produce academic papers? The answers to these questions vary from one student to another, as evidenced by the same template prompting Wong's slip from other-regulation to object-regulation and Cheung's improvement from other-regulation to self-regulation. Perhaps one useful pedagogical strategy is to have multiple processual assignments leading up to the term paper. For instance, students can be asked to submit a research plan at the beginning of the workshop, and the Introduction and Literature Review drafts in the middle. Towards the end, students can take a feedback viva (Seviour, 2015), in which instructors can help students engage more deeply with exemplars and reflect on their composing processes. These assignments create structured mediational spaces for instructors to offer incisive, on-going formative feedback, and provide students ample opportunities to move from being object- and other-regulated to being self-regulated.

Finally, EAP instructors should be alert to the halo effect of the exemplars they construct and provide. The template in this study is a case in point. It was meant to

scaffold student understanding of organizing a term paper and citing resources. However, according to Fong's comment in Section 4.4, she privileged the template over the sample articles because it serviced her min-max mentality: investing the minimum effort and expecting the maximum return. As such, Fong mimicked the template as what she perceived an immediate solution to the assignment. Another unexpected fallout of the template is that it became what Foucault (2000) calls "a regime of truth" (p. 131). Some students treated it as authoritative discourse that ultimately held currency. For instance, when there was a discrepancy between the template and one sample article, Lee chose to emulate the template, despite her realization that her research case was more aligned with the one presented in the sample article. These two cases corroborate previous findings that learners' attitudes and positioning are important (Wang, 2017) in their engagement with genre exemplars. In hindsight, perhaps a better response to the students' request of a template is to empower them in an inductive quest, or a discover-based approach (see also Cheng, 2008). They can be asked to work in small groups and take note of the organizational patterns and the number of sources cited in the sample articles. Based on their observation and discussion, they can construct a template for their term papers and decide whether a numerical target of sources is needed. After that, teacher-led discussion can compare different student-constructed templates and numbers of required sources. These rhetorical consciousness-raising and textual production activities (Hyon, 2017) tap students' reflexivity and agency, and allow them opportunities to make sense of the genre features from bottom up, not top down.

7. Conclusion

Genre exemplars are routinely used in EAP instruction to scaffold student writers (Wette, 2014) and develop their academic writing skills (Hyon, 2001, 2017). To gain a deeper understanding of the role of genre exemplars, this study took a processual perspective and examined eight Chinese EFL students' engagement with genre models when composing their first academic papers. Framed from the Vygotskian distinction between *mimicry*, *emulation*, and *imitation*, this study revealed the multifaceted and dynamic nature of imitative learning. Intra-individual and inter-individual differences were observed in students' perception and use of genre exemplars. The divergent imitative patterns and processes were mainly mediated by students' language

proficiency, exposure to genre conventions, perception of exemplars' affordances, and perception of power imbalance between examples. Therefore, to assess the mediating effect of genre exemplars, EAP instructors can use the tripartite framework as a heuristic to take account of both products and processes of imitative leaning.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the inquiry scope is limited to the students' first term papers. It will be necessary to adopt a longitudinal design to examine the trajectory of students' imitative learning across timescales. For example, will the genre features that are mimicked in one term paper be emulated or imitated in subsequent papers? Additionally, will students' imitative learning patterns and processes vary from similar contexts (e.g., in the same discipline) to dissimilar contexts (e.g., across different disciplines)? Will the internalized genre features in one subject domain be facilitative or inhibitive when students engage with genre exemplars in another subject domain? The answers to these questions will allow EAP instructors to understand how students' ZPDs evolve through multiple iterations of imitative learning and how genre exemplars mediate the development and realization of students' potential for academic writing.

Note

1 Swales (1990) distinguishes two types of citation forms: integral and non-integral. Integral citations assume a grammatical role in a sentence, while non-integral citations do not assume a grammatical role in a sentence but are placed within brackets. Petrić (2007) identifies the following functions of citing sources in academic papers: attribution, exemplification, further reference, statement of use, application, evaluation, establishing links between sources, and comparison of one's own findings or interpretation with other sources.

Appendix A

Open-ended questionnaire for the EAP workshop (student)

This questionnaire intends to understand your learning needs in the upcoming EAP workshop. Please answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge. Your response will inform the design of the EAP workshop.

1. What kinds of writing assignment have you experienced so far? Please provide some writing samples for reference.

2. What writing skills and knowledge have you learned so far?
3. What writing skills and knowledge do you want to focus on in the EAP workshop?
4. What difficulties do you think you will experience when writing your first-ever term paper?

Open-ended questionnaire for the EAP workshop (content specialist)

This questionnaire intends to understand your expectation of the upcoming EAP workshop. Please answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge. Your response will inform the design of the workshop.

1. From your previous experience, what difficulties do students have to wrestle with when writing the term paper for your course?
2. What writing skills and knowledge do you want to focus on in the EAP workshop?
3. Some researchers prefer to use sample articles as a textual guide for students. Some others prefer a discovery-based approach to have students interview practitioners and gain first-hand experience of the targeted genre. Which approach do you prefer?
4. If you prefer the first approach, please provide some sample articles for my reference. If you prefer the second one, please recommend practitioners to be interviewed. You are also welcome to offer other alternatives to structure the EAP workshop.

Appendix B

Paper template provided to the students in the EAP workshop

1. Introduction
2. Research Design
   2.1 Working definitions
   2.2 Research questions
   2.3 Data collection
   2.4 Data profile
3. Data Analysis
   3.1 Dimension 1

3.2 Dimension 2

3.3 Dimension 3

.....

4. Conclusion

References (at least 5 sources cited)

Appendix C

Grading criteria

- Define research questions clearly
- Summarize and engage with existing scholarship
- Support findings with convincing evidence
- Present findings in a coherent manner
- Use research that is credible and properly cited following APA guidelines

Appendix D

Text-based interview outline

1. [Referring to the individual instances of in-text citation] When you cited sources, did you use the sample articles as models? How did you use them?
2. [Referring to the individual instances of subheadings] When you organized your term paper, did you use the paper template as a model? How did you use the template?
3. Why did you cite sources in your term paper?
4. In the reference list, you have X (number of) sources. Why did you cite only X sources? (Or why did you cite more than 5 sources?)
5. What did you think of the sample articles and the paper template? Were they helpful? Did you experience any difficulty when using them?

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