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Self-Positioning and Critical Thinking: Demotivated Students in English for Academic Purposes

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Abstract

With burgeoning attention to English for Academic Purposes (EAP), increasing emphasis has been placed on learners' Critical Thinking (CT), their experiences of demotivation, and how these factors interact within EAP writing framework. At the same time, learners' self-positioning in the EAP context has emerged as a process variable influencing their academic engagement and writing development. This study employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) as the primary analytical tool, collecting questionnaire data from 473 Chinese university students to examine the relationship between CT and Demotivation. To enhance the scientific rigor of the findings, stimulated recall diaries were introduced as a triangulated data source and two student participants were invited to explore, through the lens of self-positioning, the mediating effects between CT and Demotivation. Findings from the quantitative analysis indicated that Misconceptions in CT exerted the strongest influence on demotivation, followed by Valuing CT (VCT), and lastly Confidence in CT (CCT). The qualitative results revealed that teachers exerted a strong mediating effect on learners' CT cognition and subsequent writing demotivation trend. This study contributes pedagogical insights from a positive psychology perspective, offering EAP instructors a deeper understanding of how learners' cognitive beliefs and emotional attitudes significantly shape their academic writing experiences.

Keywords: *English for Academic Purposes, Critical Thinking, Demotivation, Self-Positioning, Structural Equation Model*

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Introduction

Based on a sociocultural argument, despite the potential involvement of diverse fields and educational disciplines, the purpose behind designing any curricular program at a university is

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almost invariably to enable students to reflect on the society in which they live from multiple perspectives. This reflection is intended to foster Critical Thinking (CT) about existing social behaviors and societal products, and ultimately, to empower students to construct their own cultural artifacts using the knowledge they have acquired, thereby contributing to societal development (Halpern & Dunn, 2021). Regarding the presentation of academic outcomes, nearly all higher education institutions require students to demonstrate their work in the form of course reports or research papers. Moreover, in academic contexts, some studies have revealed that over 80% of the research papers published globally are written in English, thereby underscoring both the recognized importance of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and the widespread practice of publishing research articles in English (Chemir & Kitila, 2022; for a recent review of research on EAP see Pomat, 2025).

Although completing writing tasks in English is considered one of the core competencies they must master, the requirements of EAP—such as writing course reports, research papers, journal articles, and theses—continue to pose significant challenges (Ellis & Wulff, 2015). For young scholars who have yet to establish themselves as mature academics, identifying research topics that both resonate with their academic interests and carry scholarly significance can become a pressing challenge, which in turn requires researchers to proactively design their research tasks rather than relying on teachers to set communicative tasks in an English for General Purpose (EGP) course (Omidian et al., 2023).

Thus, over the past 20 years, CT has increasingly become an essential component of EAP writing. Teachers often encourage learners to boldly question specific theories or models; regardless of whether such critiques are scientifically sound, the goal is to help learners develop a cognitive framework that enables them to assess whether the conditions under which a theory or model is generated are reasonable. For a considerable period, teachers have primarily shared coding strategies to provide learners with formulaic lexical chunks and grammatical structures commonly used in EAP writing (Dafouz, 2021; Kamaşak et al., 2021). Additionally, by leveraging various language teaching paradigms, instructors have designed pedagogical models tailored specifically to EAP writing.

However, for a prolonged period, educators have predominantly assessed EAP learners from a classroom instruction perspective. Given the diverse cultural backgrounds of EAP users, the study incorporates a Structural Equation Model (SEM) with Categorical Variables to include multilevel influencing factors, thereby offering a more comprehensive analysis of the determinants affecting both CT and demotivation. In the second stage, drawing on Verstehen's analytical tradition, the diaries will be transformed into empirical data to achieve a deeper understanding of the respondents (Patton, 2015). The long-term objective of the study is to help educators refine classroom discussions to enhance learners' logical and dialectical thinking skills, enable learners to more effectively employ learning strategies, adapt to varying English pragmatic contexts, and ultimately construct a positive EAP writing identity.

Literature Review

Critical Thinking (CT): The Watershed and Leap from EGP to EAP

In EGP classrooms, the majority of learners' English proficiency is significantly different from that of native speakers, and in some cases, none of the learners in the class may have achieved a high level of language proficiency. In this context, communicative tasks designed by teachers

are usually based on learners' own interests, with the primary goal of helping them quickly adapt to a new second-language identity (Barkhuizen, 2004).

However, the primary challenge learners face when transitioning from EGP to EAP is the need to redesign and readjust the linguistic resources they acquired in previous courses. During the process, young academic researchers, together with their advisors, co-construct unique situated communities, exploring more in-depth academic topics and providing valuable contributions to societal development (Corcoran et al., 2022). This shift means that young researchers must redefine their rights and obligations, cultivating their CT to independently think about academic topics.

CT plays a crucial role in EAP writing, as it involves "reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (Ennis, 1987, p. 10). Moore (2017) summarizes Ennis's understanding of CT and identifies five main roles that CT plays in academic activities:

1. Judging whether there is ambiguity in a line of reasoning;
2. Judging whether certain statements contradict one another;
3. Judging whether a conclusion necessarily follows;
4. Judging whether a statement is specific enough;
5. Judging whether a statement is actually the application of a certain principle, etc. (p. 21).

CT serves as a bridge between external resources available to learners and the internal resources they can utilize (Jackson & Kennett, 2025). Through continuous integration of their internal resources, learners are able to identify and access various external resources that are relevant to their research as a way of initiating a second round of selection for useful resources.

Therefore, the benchmarking effect between the selection of needed materials and CT practice enable learners to take on academic responsibilities, decide which research topics to explore, justify their feasibility, and ensure the rigor and ethical standards of academic writing (Butler, 2024). Upon successfully completing academic writing, either independently or collaboratively, learners also gain a deeper understanding of the added value of language learning, thereby coming to realize that they can use the target language to conduct meaningful research that contributes to social development, which further helps young researchers position themselves within their future professional identities and contribute to societal transformation (Potter, 2022).

Critical English for Academic Purposes (CEAP), proposed by Pennycook in 1997, emphasizes the diverse values and dynamic fluctuations within the EAP teaching and practice process. To cultivate CEAP, Almuhan (2024) conducted a survey and found most teachers mentioned that their primary approach to developing students' CEAP was through teaching EAP-specific skills, including providing grammar and vocabulary choices in EAP writing based on systemic functional linguistics, using metaphorical grammar word lists to help learners improve their writing skills, and exploring the effects of learners' familiarity with topics on their mood and the complexity of their EAP writing through EAP writing experiments.

However, as in Almuhan's (2024) research, most EAP teaching studies, including this one, align with the finding that teachers often neglect aspects of EAP beyond cognitive writing skills, particularly the psychological factors and external support that influence learners apart from language use itself. In Almuhan's interviews, only 6 out of 22 teachers (6/22) mentioned intentional focus on CEAP, specifically discussing EAP's disciplinary norms and applications

with students, and only three teachers (3/22) mentioned that they had considered the learners' individual needs in EAP writing.

Demotivation in EAP: The Overt Manifestation of Critical Thinking Deficiency

Demotivation is characterized by a loss of drive toward research projects, a diminished courage to confront and resolve existing challenges, and an inability to self-motivate in the face of academic hurdles, thus allowing negative 'toxins' to proliferate (Zhang & Modehiran, 2025).

In the context of EAP, existing research has demonstrated that many learners report difficulties in articulating their ideas clearly and concisely in English when completing academic papers or assignments, which often leads to negative emotional responses toward EAP writing tasks (Weganofa et al., 2024). Effective academic writing requires the ability to critically evaluate and synthesize information, and to organize arguments within a coherent logical framework to express one's ideas persuasively. Within EAP, CT serves as a vital bridge connecting language and content; without CT, written texts risk becoming disjointed sequences of words lacking coherent logical relationships (Aston, 2023; Septiany et al., 2024).

Previous research proposed that many students are unable to effectively apply CT to their EAP writing, which has resulted in demotivation (Ojong, 2024). A potential possibility is that teachers often prioritized the transmission of knowledge and skills while neglecting to allocate sufficient time for students to process and internalize information. Moreover, teachers frequently overlook the ways in which students search for, synthesize, and critically evaluate information (Abbas & Fathira, 2022).

To analyze the implicit mechanism of demotivation, it is L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2006) (L2 MSS) that has been used widely, in which it has been regarded as a 'catalyst' that propels learners toward the pursuit of truth. This model consists of three essential components: (1) ideal L2 self, (2) ought-to L2 self, and (3) learning experience. Yang and Chanyoo (2022) conducted a motivational survey with 95 undergraduate students from China, Japan, and Korea learning English in Thailand, finding that the ideal L2 self has a strong linear predictive relationship with the ought-to L2 self. Garcés-Manzanera (2024) extended L2 MSS beyond the classroom, finding that learners who participated in additional second-language courses exhibited a more comprehensive motivational system.

Although empirical research specifically examining the relationship between CT and demotivation within EAP remains relatively scarce, a substantial body of studies has already highlighted the positive impact of CT on second language (L2) writing (Gardesten & Herrlin, 2024). CT has been shown to enhance performance across all categories of writing skills (Haji, 2024), facilitate deeper engagement in the writing process (Ho & Savignon, 2007), boost learners' writing motivation, and promote the development of collaborative writing pedagogy (Patra et al., 2022). Building upon these earlier findings, the present study seeks to explore, from a reverse perspective, how CT development may also relate to demotivation within the EAP writing context.

Self-Positioning in CT: Volatile Factors Affecting EAP Motivation

Self-positioning refers to "locating oneself and others with rights and obligations in and through talk" (Kayi-Aydar, 2014, p. 687). The highly interactive nature of self-positioning means that it is continuous, dynamic, and subject to change. Self-positioning spans the process

in EAP writing, encompassing one's understanding in resource choice, information process and ideas exchange. In comparison to the L2 Motivational Self-System (L2 MSS), the positioning system is more suited for observing personal changes during the EAP writing at a micro-level, including the learner's evolving self-concept for the aim and nature of EAP writing and peers and teachers subsequent feedback for one's periodical achievements, in which it can be counted as a drive for one's advancement work (Song & Song, 2023).

Teachers often require learners to incorporate CT into their research. However, students may fundamentally do not how to apply CT in their writings or ignorance for CT may elicit wrong application in their own writings and when the learner's CT is not evident or wrong in their writing, they may be reprimanded (Yang & Xu, 2025). In these moments, learners may shift from a position of academic subjectivity to that of a helpless figure, believing that their lack of rigor in research prevents the progress of their work (Xing et al., 2025). As Davies (2000) notes, when an individual associates a negative self-concept with their identity, they lose the capacity to effectively express their self-awareness. Therefore, carefully considering the self-positioning of EAP learners is crucial, as it plays a significant role in whether the research can continue smoothly and effectively. Therefore, despite the lack of extensive empirical research in this area, the present study incorporates self-positioning as a moderating factor in the relationship between CT and demotivation.

The Study

A key challenge of CT lies in its elusive nature. In contrast to indicators such as WTC, which can be directly observed in the classroom, CT serves as the externalization of a learner's cognitive processes, making it harder for instructors to observe in real-time. Therefore, the first indicator of whether a learner demonstrates strong CT is their understanding. The second evaluative criterion is the learner's confidence in CT. The final assessment indicator is the valuing CT. Any deficiency in these three areas may lead to demotivation. Classroom Characteristics, Learning Materials, Low Scores, Learning Environment, Learning Interest, and Teachers are incumbent dimensions in evaluating all potential influences on demotivation. To explore the pathways linking CT and demotivation, we propose the following hypotheses:

- RH₁:** Classroom characteristics may influence misconceptions in CT.
- RH₂:** Learning materials may influence misconceptions in CT.
- RH₃:** Low scores may influence misconceptions in CT.
- RH₄:** Learning environment may influence misconceptions in CT.
- RH₅:** Learning interests may influence misconceptions in CT.
- RH₆:** Teachers may influence misconceptions in CT.
- RH₇:** Classroom characteristics will be related with confidence in CT.
- RH₈:** Learning materials will be related with confidence in CT.
- RH₉:** Low scores will be related with confidence in CT.
- RH₁₀:** Learning environment will be related with confidence in CT.
- RH₁₁:** Learning interests will be related with confidence in CT.
- RH₁₂:** Teachers will be related with confidence in CT.
- RH₁₃:** Classroom will show an increased relationship with CT value.
- RH₁₄:** Learning materials will show an increased relationship with CT value.
- RH₁₅:** Low scores will show an increases relationship with CT value.

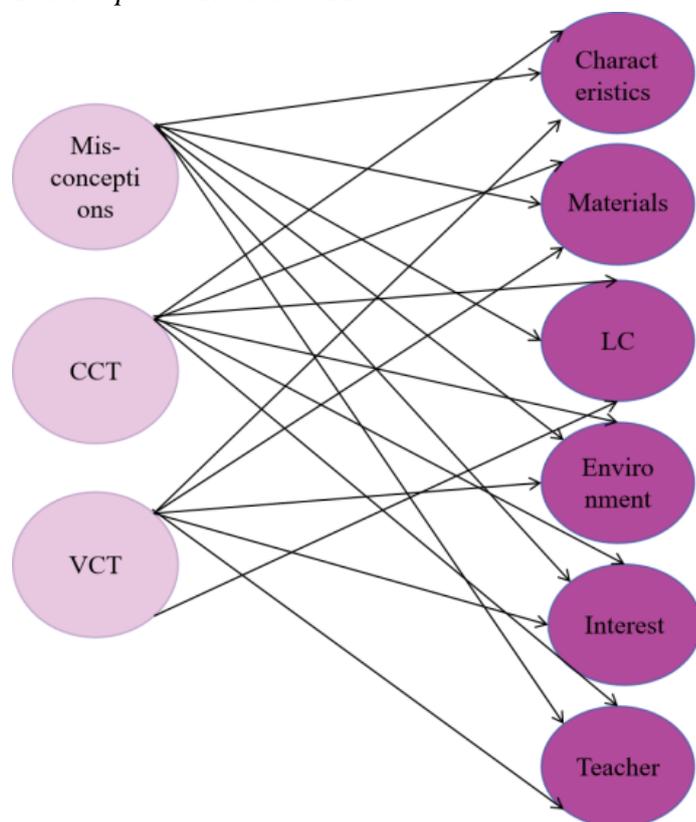
RH16: Learning environment will show an increased relationship with CT value.

RH17: Learning interest will show an increased relationship with CT value.

RH18: Teachers will show an increased relationship with CT value.

Figure 1

The Proposed Research Model



* CCT: Confidence in Critical Thinking; VCT: Valuing Critical Thinking; LC: Low Scores

Self-positioning is a subjective process that constantly occurs in the interaction between the individual and the external world, which influences an individual's behaviors and emotions, and which, in turn, can trigger further behaviors (Smith & Drybrough, 2024). To explore how interactive negotiation affects learners' self-positioning and the role this self-positioning plays in the relationship between CT and demotivation, my research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How does learners' self-positioning during the interactive negotiation process influence the construction of CT?

RQ2: What impact does the transformation of self-positioning during interactive negotiation have on demotivation?

Method

Phase 1

Participants

A total of 473 participants were recruited for this study. Among them, 213 are undergraduate students (45%), and 260 are graduate students (master's and doctoral level) (55%). In terms of gender, 224 participants are male (47%) and 249 are female (53%). Learners with overseas study experience accounted for 36% (170 individuals), while the remaining 303 participants

(64%) had not participated in any study-abroad programs. Of the participants, 317 (67%) were majoring in English, while 156 (33%) were in other subjects. Additionally, 201 participants (42%) had published academic papers or completed course assignments in English as a first language, whereas 272 participants (58%) neither had published papers nor completed assignments in English as their first language.

Table 1
Basic Information of Participants

Basic Information	Descriptive Statistics
Diploma	Undergraduate: 213 (45%) Postgraduate: 260 (55%)
Gender	Male: 224 (47%) Female: 249 (53%)
Study Experience	Study-abroad: 170 (36%) Domestic: 303 (64%)
Major	English-related: 317 (67%) Non-English-related: 156 (33%)
Publication in English	Yes: 201 (42%) No: 272 (58%)

Research instrument

The first questionnaire used in this study is the Development of the Critical Thinking Toolkit (CriTT), including three dimensions: Misconception, CCT, and VCT (Stupple et al., 2017). The second questionnaire used in this study is an adapted version of the demotivation measurement developed by Al-Khasawneh (2017). However, as this scale was not originally designed for EAP, reasonable modifications were made so as to adapt it to the EAP. After the adaptation of the questionnaire, a pretest were made within 10 participants. Upon collection, the reliability coefficient was 0.86, and the KMO validity index was 0.61, indicating that the adapted questionnaire has good reliability and validity.

Data Analysis

A SEM model with Category analysis was employed in this study. The independent variables are the three dimensions of CT with the dependent variable being the six dimensions of demotivation. Gender, overseas study experience, Major, Diploma, and publication in English are included as five binary categorical variables. These five factors are considered as categorical variables to examine how they moderate the relationship between CT and demotivation. The SEM model was fitted using the *lavaan* package in R. Model fit was evaluated through standard indices including CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR. Categorical moderators were incorporated as interaction terms.

After completing the quantitative data collection and analysis, the study aimed to investigate how individuals' intrinsic emotional and cognitive mechanisms mediate the relationship between CT and demotivation. To achieve this, two participants were carefully invited from the original survey sample to participate in a one-month follow-up study. The two participants scored 4.50 and 4.73 on the CT scale, indicating excellent performance. In the demotivation scale, one participant scored 4.88, suggesting a high level of demotivation, while the other scored 2.04, indicating a relatively low level of demotivation. The participant with

the lower score had previously studied in the UK but dropped out because of the bad experience in EAP writing.

As a source for interpreting empirical data, this study used stimulated memory diaries as a research tool. The purpose is to allow participants to express their views and attitudes through recalling their past EAP experiences and facilitates accurate recollection of past events. The report can be written in either Chinese or English. For reports written in Chinese, a native English-speaking international student in China was hired for translation. As compensation, the researcher provided a 10 RMB bookstore voucher.

Nvivo 15 was used to analyze diary data and support theoretical saturation assessment. In this study, the selective coding focuses on academic writing identity positioning, aiming to incorporate all codes into a specific theoretical framework for identity positioning analysis.

Based on the established selective coding, the second and third levels are axial coding and open coding, respectively. The six elements of interaction theory proposed by the Engage model are selected as the axial coding for this study (Aghdam et al., 2024). The choice of the Engage model is due not only to its wide application in fields such as medicine, management, education, and applied linguistics but also because its comprehensiveness encompasses all interactive components between teachers and students in the classroom: energizing (initiating classroom teaching through greetings and ice-breaking actions), navigating (guiding learners to use their linguistic resources to critically evaluate a topic), generating (encouraging learners to report their research findings orally or in writing), applying (prompting learners to consider the contribution of their research to societal development), gauging (evaluating learners' learning outcomes through various methods), and extending (helping students refine their research results and fostering a sense of achievement).

Before discussing the similarities and differences between the materials and themes, the two authors of this study independently conducted coding to ensure inter-rater consistency. Additionally, an essential step in this study was obtaining ethical consent. Prior to the study, both participants were informed of the research's purpose and agreed to allow the authors to use narratives of their stimulated memory diaries in the article.

Result

Structural Equation Model (SEM) Results

Model fit

A series of indicators were used to assess the goodness of fit for the SEM model, with the results presented in Table 2. In the chi-square test, the non-significant chi-square value indicates that the model fits well. Ideally, the chi-square test for the model should be non-significant, with significant values typically only appearing in studies with very large sample sizes. Furthermore, the CFI for this study is 0.972, the RMSEA is 0.051, and the SRMR is 0.072, all demonstrating a good fit for the model. In general, a $CFI \geq 0.95$, $RMSEA \leq 0.06$, and $SRMR \leq 0.08$ are considered indicators of a good model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1998).

Table 2*Model Fit Characteristics*

Indices	Value
CFI	0.972
RMSEA	0.051
SRMR	0.072

Structural Model

Figure 2 demonstrates a good fit between the SEM model and the data. Table 3 presents the results of the proposed path relationships, showing that 11 hypotheses were statistically significant. Specifically, when examining the relationship between Misconceptions in CT and demotivation, all six dimensions of demotivation—classroom characteristics ($\beta=0.48$, $p < .001$), learning materials ($\beta=0.55$, $p < .001$), low scores ($\beta=0.58$, $p < .001$), learning environment ($\beta=0.48$, $p < .001$), learning interests ($\beta=0.43$, $p < .001$), and teachers ($\beta=0.35$, $p < .001$)—demonstrated significant effects, thus supporting H1 -H6. However, when examining the relationship between CCT and demotivation, only teachers ($\beta=-0.34$, $p < 0.01$) showed a significant negative correlation, with no significant effects found for the other factors. Therefore, only H12 is supported. For the other five dimensions of CCT, the effect sizes are all close to 0 (< 0.10), and the p-values are far above 0.05. Specifically, classroom characteristics ($\beta=-0.06$, $p=0.38$), learning materials ($\beta=-0.09$, $p=0.15$), low scores ($\beta=-0.06$, $p=0.28$), learning environment ($\beta=-0.07$, $p=0.35$), and learning interests ($\beta=-0.07$, $p=0.28$) all show negligible effects.

According to Hair et al. (2019), when the standardized effect size is less than $|0.10|$, the indicator is considered statistically and practically insignificant. Thus, H7 -H11 are not supported. When examining the relationship between VCT and demotivation, learning materials ($\beta=-0.28$, $p < .001$), low scores ($\beta=-0.34$, $p < .001$), learning interests ($\beta=-0.35$, $p < .001$), and teachers ($\beta=-0.15$, $p < .05$) exhibited strong negative correlations, supporting H14, H15, H17, and H18. The remaining effects—classroom characteristics ($\beta=-0.05$, $p=0.55$) and learning environment ($\beta=-0.05$, $p=0.53$)—showed small effect sizes, and thus H13 and H16 were not supported.

Figure 2
The SEM Model Results

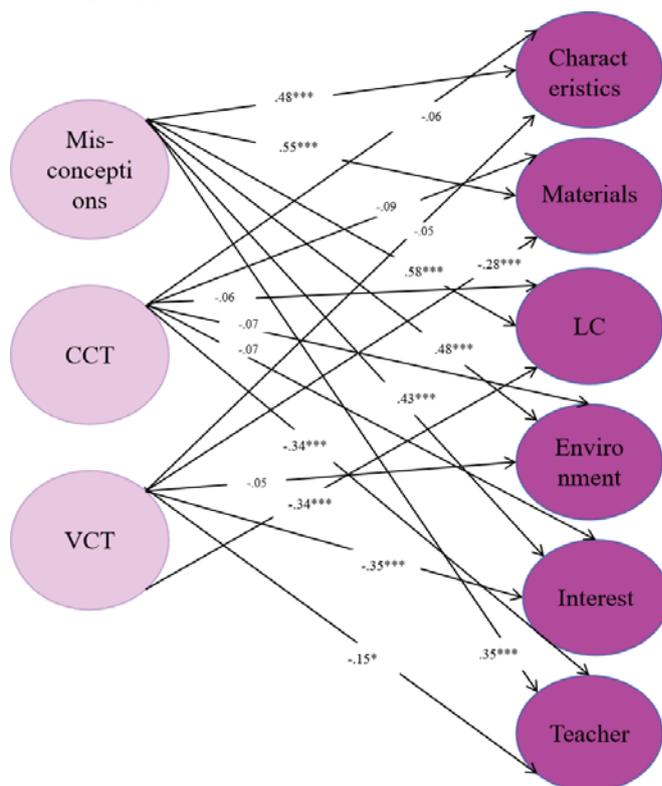


Table 3
The Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	Coefficient	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	SE	P	Results
H1	Misconceptions→Classroom Characteristics	0.481	-0.675	-0.288	0.099	***	Accepted
H2	Misconceptions→Learning Materials	0.546	-0.712	-0.381	0.084	***	Accepted
H3	Misconceptions→Low Scores	0.582	-0.745	-0.419	0.083	***	Accepted
H4	Misconceptions→Learning Environment	0.478	-0.659	-0.296	0.093	***	Accepted
H5	Misconceptions→Learning Interests	0.425	-0.591	-0.259	0.085	***	Accepted
H6	Misconceptions→Teachers	0.350	-0.505	-0.195	0.079	***	Accepted
H7	CCT→Classroom Characteristics	-0.063	-0.079	0.216	0.075	0.38	Rejected
H8	CCT→Learning Materials	-0.092	-0.034	0.217	0.064	0.15	Rejected
H9	CCT→Low Scores	-0.064	-0.053	0.182	0.060	0.28	Rejected
H10	CCT→Learning Environment	-0.074	-0.228	0.080	0.079	0.35	Rejected
H11	CCT→Learning Interests	-0.065	-0.054	0.184	0.061	0.28	Rejected
H12	CCT→Teachers	-0.342	-0.463	-0.222	0.061	***	Accepted
H13	VCT→Classroom Characteristics	-0.047	-0.203	0.108	0.080	0.55	Rejected
H14	VCT→Learning Materials	-0.282	-0.398	-0.095	0.077	***	Accepted
H15	VCT→Low Scores	-0.344	-0.498	-0.189	0.079	***	Accepted
H16	VCT→Learning Environment	-0.048	-0.100	0.195	0.075	0.53	Rejected
H17	VCT→Learning Interests	-0.347	-0.476	-0.217	0.066	***	Accepted
H18	VCT→Teachers	-0.149	0.023	0.276	0.065	*	Accepted

Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Interaction Effects of Categorical Variables

Table 4 presents the interaction effects of five binary categorical variables on the latent variable CT and the observed variable demotivation. The results show that gender ($\beta=0.32$, $p < .001$) and major ($\beta=0.24$, $p < .001$) significantly moderate the relationship between the two variables. Among the female group, students with high CT scores exhibited a smaller decline in EAP motivation ($\beta=-0.21$), whereas no such effect was found within the male group ($\beta=0.11$). Furthermore, in terms of academic major, students majoring in English ($\beta=-0.16$) demonstrated a smaller decline in EAP motivation when exhibiting high CT scores, while students in non-English majors showed no such effect ($\beta=0.05$). To quantify CT scores, learners with an average CT score ranging from 4.0 to 5.0 in the study were classified as high CT performers.

Table 4

The Results of Interaction Effects

Path	Male (β)	Female (β)	P
CT→Demotivation	0.11	-0.21	< 0.001
	Major in English	Major in Non-English	
	-0.16	0.08	< .001
	Overseas Students	Domestic Students	
	0.02	0.07	0.51
	Undergraduates	Postgraduates	
	0.04	-0.08	0.07
	Publication in English	Non-publication in English	
	-0.06	0.04	0.16

Self-Positioning in CT and Demotivation

Table 5 presents the self-positioning model from an EAP perspective. The model illustrates a distinct difference between EAP and EGP learners, particularly in terms of their preferences for the classroom atmosphere. EAP learners show a noticeable shift, no longer relying on whether the instructor initiates ice-breaking activities during teaching. Furthermore, these learners tend to associate writing application with writing assessments and guidance, suggesting that both participants believe academic output must receive feedback to extend its value. Additionally, in the open coding phase, we intentionally selected language excerpts from the two participants to demonstrate their distinctly different attitudes toward their EAP experiences.

Table 5*Results of Coding*

Selective Coding	Axial Coding	Open Coding (Example)	Frequency
EAP Self-positioning	Energizing	Instructors tend to cultivate a seminar-like classroom atmosphere, encouraging students to speak freely and express their own perspectives.	3
	Navigating	Drawing on their extensive teaching experience and disciplinary expertise, instructors are often able to pinpoint issues with striking accuracy—issues that frequently reflect common challenges shared among students.	22
	Generating	After receiving instruction, students naturally begin to generate new ideas.	9
	Applying	Browse through a wide range of course-related note sharing.	2
	Gauging	I received relatively less guidance from my instructor.	14
	Extending	The teacher gave too little time to the students.	16

In Figure 3, the study presents the high-frequency word cloud derived from the participants' stimulated recall diaries. At the center of the cloud, the most frequently mentioned words, process and example, are highlighted, indicating that both participants placed strong emphasis on the writing process and practical engagement in writing—both of which are closely associated with their supervisors' guidance. The outer layer of the word cloud reveals a stronger focus on concrete writing experiences. Notably, the two participants, who had significantly different writing experiences, expressed contrasting emotions—such as enjoyment and aversion—towards their academic writing practices. The next chapter will focus on analyzing the writer-supervisor relationship and the dynamics of their interaction.

Figure 3*The Results of Cloud Plot*

largely derived from external affirmation—especially the recognition of their instructors. Teachers' academic approval significantly enhances students' sense of well-being, including their academic courage and motivation.

In contrast, VCT was found to be negatively correlated with demotivation overall, with the exception of Learning Characteristics and Learning Environment, for which no significant effects were observed. This can be reasonably explained by the fact that both characteristics and environment are factors that learners are least able to influence through belief systems.

VCT, as a key dimension of CT, has attracted growing attention, primarily because it centers on learners' belief in the value of CT itself. Dewey (1961) emphasized that CT is essentially a process of inquiry into theoretically validated beliefs—one that involves continuously re-evaluating their intrinsic worth through rational thinking and by altering the contextual conditions under which those beliefs were initially established. Consequently, if learners assign low value to CT—perceiving it as optional or non-essential in academic writing—they may become overwhelmed by the abundance of textual sources without being able to identify the key insights relevant to their own research. This disorientation can ultimately lead to increased demotivation.

Additionally, this study identifies a noteworthy moderating effect of gender and major on demotivation related to CT. Specifically, female participants who excelled in CT demonstrated a reduced decline in writing motivation, a pattern not observed among male counterparts. This finding diverges from previous research regarding gender differences, where extensive literature has consistently indicated that men, in a predominantly male-oriented society, occupy a higher proportion of high-level, specialized occupations and tend to outperform women in high-complexity educational and professional settings. A possible explanation may lie in the increasing academic resilience and engagement of female students, who are often more active in academic interaction with instructors. Moreover, female students, in China, on average, achieve higher entrance exam scores for university admission compared to males, consequently attracting greater attention from university faculty. This faculty inclination does not reflect personal biases but rather acknowledges women's superior engagement and interactivity in academic contexts.

It is also noteworthy that students majoring in English with superior CT skills exhibited a lesser decline in motivation compared to their non-English major counterparts who excelled similarly in CT. This aligns with previous findings, which emphasize that non-native English speakers encounter significant language barriers when writing in English. Such barriers are especially pronounced among Chinese learners, given the substantial differences between Chinese and English language systems in terms of norms, thought processes, and writing conventions. Consequently, Chinese learners' English compositions frequently attract criticism for being 'Chinglish,' prompting educators and researchers to focus primarily on developing adherence to linguistic norms in EAP, often neglecting the critical cultivation of fundamental writing habits and cognitive frameworks necessary from the outset.

Self-positioning as a Mediating Variable: An Essential Requirement for Achieving Positive Academic Writing

In our quantitative analysis, we discovered that Misconception, CCT, and VCT exert influences on various dimensions of EAP demotivation, and notably each of which is related with the

variable of teachers, making us reflect on what effects do teachers hold during the construction of CT and put CT into EAP practice. In a recognition that interaction between students-teachers will inject important predictable effect into the relationship between CT and demotivation. Therefore, this section specifically focuses on exploring how self-positioning of self-roles, in relation to teachers' roles, mediate the relationship between CT and demotivation.

Writers: Primary Agents of Academic Writing Responsibility

The self-positioning adopted by the two participants in the process of academic writing involved defining themselves as the primary academic agent and the main bearer of responsibility, which is in line with the requirement of a high self-efficacy learner, with learners harnessing academic resources to accomplish specific writing tasks and pursue desired outcomes (Blyznyuk & Kachak, 2024). Episode 1 (E1) illustrates how participants articulated their self-perceptions in diary reflections.

E1:

After gathering and organizing relevant information, determining how to make further innovation based upon previous research is fundamentally the essence of academic writing.

The participants' proactive self-efficacy coincides with engagement, which all together facilitate CT in meaningful learning. However, learners may also encounter challenges and therefore birth pessimistic behaviors, in which teachers will be acted as a process variable to reshape learners' cognition and affection (Ly, 2024). The teaching mode for CT will straightforwardly affect the quality of evaluative feedback, which influence learners' proficiency in mastering relevant skills and attitude in academic strive.

Teachers: Indispensable Guides in Academic Writing

Both participants devoted considerable attention in their stimulated recall diary entries to discussing the indispensable role of teachers in their successful academic writing. Teachers were viewed by both participants as essential contributors to the writing process.

E2:

Some students, for various reasons, may hesitate to express their authentic thoughts and inspirations. Here, teachers should provide supportive guidance and attentive listening, helping students articulate their ideas and offering constructive feedback. Such an approach encourages students' willingness and confidence to share their insights.

The participants' expectations of teachers clearly demonstrate that interactive negotiation between learners and teachers constitutes an essential mediating mechanism in fostering positive EAP writing motivation. Given learners' relative immaturity in EAP, possible knowledge deficits, hesitancy in idea expression, or likelihood of committing mistakes, teachers' active involvement is critically important as a benchmark to cultivate a kind of growth

mindset for students, in which their writing intelligence and CT abilities can be advanced through continuous refinement of language output.

Irresponsible teaching behaviors is now associated by undercutting growth mindset, denting academic emotions, gloomier learning prospect, even eliciting dropping out. In our review, two participants showed totally dividing ideas about EAP writing, with one feeling accomplished while another one feeling overwhelmed (Thumvichit, 2024). Even the latter finally opted for dropping out from the institution. The implicit reason is about teachers.

E3:

I believe supervisors should demonstrate a high degree of responsibility and a genuine sense of care for their students, yet my supervisor failed to do so. Indeed, due to cultural differences and divergent ideologies, I doubt many foreign supervisors can display the same strong sense of morality and genuine care as Chinese teachers typically do. Most foreign teachers, in my experience, lack substantial empathy and moral sensitivity toward students.

Successful academic writing generally requires learners' experiences to encompass three supportive dimensions: happiness, involvement, and meaningfulness (Kast, 2025). However, lacking of mentor guidance deprive learners' competences to build sustainable academic resources. Part of mentors may regard learners as independent so that they pay scant regards towards learners' academic progress. Also, many teachers mismanage the attention to students' emotions. However, for one thing, autonomy learning cannot be synonymous with disconnections between teachers and students because one of the most important responsibilities for teachers is to help learners recede anxiety emotions brought by academic failure. For another, teachers have obligations to provide emotional support, catering for learners' needs in academic care, trust and empathy.

Conversely, in similar circumstances, effective supervision not only reverses misunderstandings in CT, learning from mistakes, but adds joy, enjoyment, and builds up resilience during the process of EAP writing, achieving beneficial outcomes with greater efficiency.

E4:

My postgraduate supervisor indeed provided valuable suggestions and considerable care along our journey in academic writing. For instance, as a graduate student majoring in English translation, one of my graduation requirements was to produce a translation report. However, selecting appropriate original materials for translation posed an initial challenge, as we had to choose a book without an existing official translation, translate selected chapters ourselves, and subsequently compose an analytical translation report. During the first year of my master's program, in a compulsory course titled "Marine-related Translation," my instructor recommended a newly compiled book, "An Introduction to Ocean Politics," which was about to be officially published at that time. This book was collaboratively edited by several researchers specializing in marine studies at Ocean University of China. Both its subject, ocean politics—closely aligned with our institution's disciplinary strengths

and distinctive marine orientation—and its timeliness made this book exceptionally suitable as the source material for our translation projects. Therefore, the teacher's recommendation clearly illuminated a productive path forward for our academic endeavors.

Based on the discussion above, this study provides three pedagogical suggestions for future EAP instruction:

First, educators should reinforce learners' conceptual understanding of CT, emphasize its value, and build learners' confidence in applying CT effectively. The findings of this study clearly indicate that misconceptions related to CT significantly impact learners' EAP demotivation. Such misconceptions should not be left solely to learners themselves to resolve, as students may either gradually overcome them during the learning process or become increasingly entrenched in incorrect understandings. Currently, many teachers deliberately omit explicit CT instruction in the classroom, encouraging learners instead to independently explore and map their evolving CT understandings onto their writing, and then providing corrective feedback in subsequent writing assessments. However, this approach frequently confuses learners, leaving them uncertain about distinguishing between writing errors attributable to flawed conceptions of CT and those originating from other factors.

Second, continuous attention should be devoted to cultivating learners' English writing proficiency. Given our findings indicating that English-major learners demonstrated superior CT and lower levels of demotivation, we contend that fostering students' English writing competencies remains a critical aspect of effective EAP instruction—especially for non-English majors and male learners. Writing centers are common internationally but remain underdeveloped in Chinese universities. Chinese universities should therefore leverage their advantages in the department of foreign language by establishing dedicated writing support centers, providing critical assistance to learners whose EAP writing needs are currently unmet. Additionally, instructors should explicitly encourage male students to learn from their female counterparts, particularly by actively engaging in classroom interactions and proactively communicating with teachers.

Third, instructors should further emphasize providing timely EAP feedback to learners, encompassing both academic and emotional dimensions. Negative emotions arising during the learning process may substantially alter learners' self-positioning. Once learners adopt a thoroughly negative self-positioning, reversing such negative attitudes can be particularly challenging. Individual growth necessitates personal understanding, and learners need to appreciate that sustainable development arises from healthy interactions with their immediate academic environment. However, some instructors remain inattentive to this aspect, particularly within high-pressure contexts such as EAP instruction, where academic rigor often overshadows learners' emotional needs. Even when recognizing the value of emotional feedback, some teachers avoid offering it due to workload or implicit bias. Therefore, institutions should proactively monitor instructors' academic guidance practices and establish regular bilateral consultations, ensuring that the interests of both teachers and learners are adequately protected, thus facilitating continued academic collaboration.

Conclusion

In response to the prevalent issue of EAP demotivation among learners, and considering the increased emphasis on the importance of Critical Thinking (CT) within EAP, this study integrates SEM and Verstehen-based qualitative methods to examine CT's role. The findings underscore a close relationship between learners' CT and their demotivation in EAP contexts. Specifically, Misconceptions in CT, Confidence in CT (CCT), and Value in CT (VCT) each exhibit distinct effects on demotivation. Misconceptions in CT demonstrate the strongest positive relationship, significantly influencing all six dimensions of demotivation. The effect of VCT ranks second, showing significant negative correlations with four demotivation dimensions, while CCT has the weakest effect, presenting a notable negative correlation with only one demotivation dimension. In addition, variables of gender and major have a moderating effects between CT and demotivation.

Moreover, qualitative analyses indicate that teachers play a pivotal mediating role between learners' CT and demotivation, directly influencing learners' initial self-positioning toward academic writing. Although learners' inherent CT proficiency can affect their perceptions of teachers, data from the stimulated recall diary entries within the qualitative phase illustrate that teacher intervention substantially shapes learners' original EAP motivation, potentially redirecting their initial perceptions of EAP writing from the outset. Indeed, the influence exerted by teachers can even surpass the facilitating effects of CT itself, ultimately determining both the quality and the experiential aspects of learners' academic writing dedication.

This study represents the first attempt to examine the relationship between CT and demotivation, highlighting psychological factors that influence EAP learning and providing constructive insights for future EAP curriculum development in higher education institutions. Understanding learners' conceptions of CT is crucial for fostering cognitive skill development necessary for independent academic writing. Furthermore, the current research innovatively applies variable-based SEM analyses to uncover the influence of gender and academic major on EAP demotivation among Chinese university students. Additionally, this research uniquely utilizes qualitative rather than purely quantitative approaches to elucidate how self-positioning mediates the relationship between CT and demotivation, shaping learners' EAP developmental processes. These findings bear significant scholarly value, offering important implications for future research and informing potential reforms within SLA education.

Despite the innovative contributions of this research, two primary limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the present study exclusively targeted Chinese learners at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, lacking a comparative analysis with EAP learners from other cultural backgrounds. Future research should broaden sample selection to include learners of diverse nationalities and cultural contexts to investigate comparatively the mechanisms underlying CT and demotivation within the EAP learning process. Secondly, the quantitative portion of the study relied solely on self-reported data, which, despite its overall reliability for adult respondents, may introduce certain biases. Subsequent research endeavors should supplement questionnaire data with additional triangulated measures, such as classroom observation diaries and teacher-student interactive dialogues, to enhance methodological rigor and data credibility.

Future studies could consider incorporating culturally diverse learner populations into survey-based research, employing longitudinal designs, and utilizing multiple triangulated methods to further explicate the relationship between CT and demotivation in EAP contexts.

Investigating how such relationships gradually manifest and evolve within classroom practices would also inform targeted improvements to existing EAP courses, thereby addressing current pedagogical obstacles. Consequently, forthcoming research holds promise for generating more actionable insights into Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and EAP pedagogy, supporting learners in achieving their desired academic outcomes.

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