

# An Integrated Automatic Platform for English Majors' Graduation Thesis

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## Abstract

Despite the issues of Chinese undergraduate English majors' thesis writing, its necessity and potential benefits justify reform instead of abolition. This paper explains an integrated automatic platform for teaching and tutoring undergraduate English majors to plan, write, and defend their required graduation theses. It is suggested to be designed under the principles of assistance, independence, transparency, participation, and collaboration. Considering the existing obstacles to thesis writing, the following features should be ensured by technology: integration, automaticity, a reliable supporting tool, services and a community network for any relevant information sharing. By tapping local community and world-wide community resources, the platform can expand opportunities for all parties involved and realize the purposes of improving thesis quality, increasing students' English proficiency and fostering their lifelong learning ability.

**Keywords:** *undergraduate English majors; graduation thesis; an integrated automatic platform*

## 1. Introduction

Undergraduate English majors, like all the other graduates in mainland China, are required to complete a thesis before their graduation. This has aroused much controversy within both academia and the public arena. Since English is a foreign language in China, writing a graduation thesis in English has been proven to be much more difficult than in Chinese.

However, according to the English Committee of the National Advisory Commission on Foreign Language Teaching in Higher Education (2000), the "thesis" of 3000-5000 words is only intended as an instrument to evaluate students' English proficiency, cultivate their creativity, and familiarize them with English research basics. It is obvious that the Chinese "thesis" is a hybridity of an English thesis and an English essay, not comparable to the stringency of a real thesis in the British or American sense. Therefore, the argument of many opponents on the premise of an English thesis that calls for the abolition of the Chinese thesis-writing institution actually stands on rather shaky ground.

Although the voices to abolish the graduation thesis for undergraduate English majors are heard (Ma, 2011; Jiang, 2012), a lot of academic efforts have been made to improve the quality of English majors' thesis. Yet little has been said to adapt thesis writing to digital globalization. There seems to actually be more fear than embracement of online resources; for the Internet appears to be the source of many vices; particularly plagiarism and ghost writers. By contrast, more efforts have been made to examine the complexities of writing techniques, leaving the rich online resources and the benefits of 24/7 thesis-writing support mostly ignored and wasted. Similarly, little effort has been made to serve students and teachers, and much effort has been given, instead, to strengthen school management. Hence, it is worth trying to develop an online platform to meet the needs of undergraduate English majors' graduation thesis writing and further explore the potentialities of the Internet.

## 2. Literature Review

Although the necessity of thesis writing was seldom seriously challenged (Shi, 2010; Chen, 2012a), the controversy remains, pushing research further. Most of the existing literature on English majors' thesis writing in mainland China explained thesis writing techniques in title, thesis statement, abstract, keywords, introduction, etc., discussed thesis

management, observed common problems and offered suggestions, without considering the possibility of weak motivation or lurking collective “civil disobedience” among some students and tutors (Yang, 2006; Wu, 2009; Wang, 2004; Yao, 2010; Le, 2012). A teacher/administrator-centeredness characteristic of pushing students or teachers around instead of negotiating, guiding and serving them may not be welcome in the growing democratic atmosphere of mass education. Guo (2004) proposed a PIA model, explaining English thesis writing with the use of technology and online resources. He advocated student autonomy and online tutoring. Gu, Zhang and Gu (2010) stepped forward and experimented in their teaching with using both on and offline resources to assist students’ thesis writing. Further, Chen (2010) built a closed interactive online platform to address a larger audience of administrators, tutors and students, facilitated their communications, enabling them to fulfill their writing task together in a timeless, borderless world, allowing students to migrate from place to place in their fourth year to hunt for a job, sit for an examination etc., but still leaving the problem of English proficiency unresolved and the global connectedness unattended.

The research on online English writing and information literacy opens up an opportunity to solve these problems. Online corpora have been widely proved a valuable resource to improve English writing in China, and online English writing platforms can improve students’ motivation and writing ability (Teng & Liu, 2006; Cai, 2008; Zhu, 2009; Lou, 2011; Dong & Chu, 2010; Wang & Zhang, 2012). There are probably other untapped potentialities on the Internet. However, if students have little training in information literacy, the Internet can be meaningless or merely some invisible heavy smog where frustrations, setbacks and dangers are much more expected rather than some promised treasures. The understanding of information literacy means knowing how to identify one’s needs, how to translate one’s needs into proper English keywords, how to obtain the needed information, how to evaluate and use the located information, and how to stay flexible in searching for any information (American Library Association, 2000; Horton, 2007). Web resources actually keep coming and going and being updated; proficient information literacy keeps one conscious of all possible changes, teaches one a flexible mind and requires one to be creative. Moreover, information literacy can help tap, organize and use language and management resources, both on and offline, to facilitate thesis writing. When they are skillfully organized and properly used, English language incompetence, thesis writing technical problems and rampant plagiarism among students will probably stop being grave concerns (Rosell-Aguilar, 2004; Chen, Du & Luo, 2012; Chen, Tang & Du, 2011).

Yet, the integration of information literacy into thesis writing and the scaffolding of skillfully using different resources to help thesis writing are both highly needed for students. Also, because of at least teaching and researching responsibilities, Chinese teachers cannot be highly involved in students’ thesis writing; and students are expected to work independently most of time. All this can be better solved on an integrated, supportive and automatic platform that aims to serve all parties: students, course teachers, tutors, reviewers and administrators.

The development of such an online platform can also borrow strength from the success stories of e-government. To take the US federal e-government for instance, it enjoys a higher satisfactory index than the US overall government by a score of eight. The American citizens are reported to be more participatory and collaborative in politics (Chen, 2014). This is largely due to its transformation from a Weberian perspective to a service or citizen-centered perspective. Likewise, it can be assumed that students and teachers as well, if finding the online writing platform a real service instead of another obstacle of school bureaucracy, can be probably motivated to participate, share successes, and work together in this online community—hence a better overall quality of graduation theses can be predicted. Further, the online platform can also offer administrators a more reliable performance report of students, teachers and tutors, and help with not only a more constructive communication but a possibly better decision that will affect the educational policy of students’ graduation thesis writing.

### **3. Research Framework**

#### *3.1 Research Purpose*

The purpose of this intended online platform can be understood from two aspects. First, it is an integrated platform that serves the needs of the local interested parties of students, course teachers, thesis tutors, thesis reviewers, head teachers and department administrators. Their concerns should be respectively handled. Services should be neatly organized and directly address their interests. Second, the online platform has to instruct students how to properly reach to the cyber world for legitimate assistance. The thesis platform needs to work locally but aim globally, a node of e-learning, e-teaching, e-writing and e-management that gathers different parties and also redirects these parties to a bigger virtual global community.

### 3.2 Theoretical Framework

Information age is characteristic of digitalization, global inter-connectedness, knowledge sharing and creating, and mass education. The world is becoming more citizen-centered. Therefore, the teaching and tutoring of graduation thesis in this situation needs the combination of information literacy, constructivism and democracy. Information literacy enables students not only to mobilize global human resources to locate, evaluate, and use information for the fulfillment of their graduation thesis task, but to share their original knowledge, to return kindness and generosity to the world (American Library Association, 2000). Constructivism allows teachers to promote the importance of students' participation and creation in learning, and to highlight their role of supporting and monitoring the learning process (Xu, 2006). Democracy in education can be understood as the class of students, by students, and for students; it can push teachers and administrators to be practically student-centered, to deliver better services to students, to perform with more transparency, participation, and collaboration (The White House, 2009).

The three theories are mutually compatible and complementary to each other. All of them support student-centeredness. Democracy defines the nature of class and education; constructivism explores the learning process, the roles of teachers and students, and the possible pedagogical approaches; information literacy explains the steps, techniques and methods that students need to follow in their autonomous learning. Hence, they make a practical package of theories.

### 3.3 Principles of Online Platform

Based on the theoretical framework, the following principles should be highlighted: scaffolding, independence, services, transparency, participation, and collaboration. Scaffolding and independence have a dialectic relation. Scaffolding is to initiate students into inquiries so that they can eventually gain independence from their lecturers or tutors; teachers' scaffolding and supports expect the development of students' learning autonomy. However, the assistance should not be expected just from their teachers; the platform should be moderately open so that guests can also join the community and provide help whenever possible. Students should be informed of only the basic knowledge and practice of thesis writing, and they are then encouraged to start there and take over the responsibility. Teachers are only supposed to assist when information cannot be obtained from the Internet or the sources beyond the access or knowledge of students. Also, teachers need to ensure that students' learning is progressing as expected. Different services should be provided for students, teachers, tutors, reviewers, and administrators. More pedagogical transparency, participation, and collaboration are favorable to generate everybody's motivation and bring benefits to the whole community.

In addition, the platform should integrate the needs of students, teachers, tutors, reviewers and administrators, so that full cooperation and a concerted effort can be ensured. Also, thesis writing procedures should be made as simple and automatic as possible, so that students can concentrate on the development of their ideas and their capacity to solve problems—thus developing a transferrable ability of lifelong learning.

## 4. Structures and Features

Based on what we achieved in 2012 (Chen, 2012b), this envisioned thesis writing platform can be created in the environment of Visual Studio.NET 2008 and accessed in the browser/server mode. It can be constituted of default.aspx pages and their corresponding control codes running in the background, and access tables to store the necessary initial and final data. Considering the hardware and software situations in China, the platform should be workable in both Windows and Android operating systems, and compatible with major browsers like Internet Explorer, Google Chrome and Firefox.

### 4.1 Structures

#### 4.1.1 General Structure

According to Yan and Ni (2005), most Chinese colleges and universities divide thesis writing into three phases: thesis writing course, thesis writing/tutoring and thesis defense, which corresponds with the three phases of thesis writing explained in many thesis writing textbooks: thesis writing preparation, thesis writing and thesis defense (Mu et al., 2002; Li et al., 2006). Yet another phase before thesis defense that needs attention is thesis reviewing (Qin et al., 2010; Chen, Du & Luo, 2012). Then, the chronological structure of the intended platform has at least four phases: thesis writing course, thesis writing/tutoring, thesis reviewing and thesis defense.

Three functional blocks run through the three continuous stages: information publication, services and interactive forum. Information publication includes two elements: an introduction to the platform and its institutional structure, and news that will be published for the purpose of course management by course teachers, head teachers or even

department academic leaders. Services are intended for seven different parties: visitors, students, course teachers, thesis tutors, thesis reviewers, head teachers and department academic leaders. The interactive forum is an open section for any visitor, where people can exchange information related to undergraduate English majors' thesis writing.

#### 4.1.2 Information and Interaction

The information publication can be conveniently arranged on the home page. It is suggested that latest news briefs are directly displayed so that they can be learned without the necessity of logging into the website accounts. Besides, a mission statement of the website needs to be carefully considered to encourage both participation in the website and dedication to thesis writing. To produce and sustain more attraction, persuasive techniques in advertising can be fully exploited. An additional "About" heading should be included so that visitors, students, teachers can be clear of the website operation, its policies and its relation to the school or department bureaucracy.

Interactivity is the spirit of the thesis writing community; and the intended forum has to constitute a separate heading on the homepage. To create a sense of familiarity and connectedness, popular social networking sites like Sina Weibo and Tencent QQ need to be incorporated into the forum. Official accounts on these social networks, better understood as the variations of the forum, should be readily created to connect students, teachers, administrators and a much wider world. By doing this, people can easily communicate on different platforms and information of thesis writing can be collected from different sources, thus strengthening the thesis writing community of the platform.

#### 4.1.3 Services

Services for visitors can include introduction to the platform, news, contact, course materials, resources shared by users, and forum. Course materials mean courseware on thesis writing, information literacy and online writing. Students are guided to locate, evaluate and use information, and look for legitimate assistance online either from non-native speakers or native speakers. This limited openness to unregistered visitors is both a promotion to the platform and an indicator of sharing spirit. Hopefully, the participation of visitors can help with the prosperity of the local thesis writing community.

Students should generally be required to sign in for their services. Besides the services open to visitors, students can edit their profiles; and such a profile should be connected to the school thesis forms, so that any available required information can be automatically filled. Indeed, thesis forms should be created and automatically connected to any needed information, so that students can save a lot of time filling these tables that require the information which has already been made available on this platform. Thesis writing software can increase efficiency, which can be collected, bought or developed for students. For instance, thesis template and documentation style can be created to use in MS-word software. To counteract cheating, students should be required to record their readings and thoughts from the very beginning; and hence something like Evernote or Microsoft OneNote should be available to students. During the process, students may find something helpful to thesis writing, and they should be encouraged to share in the community. In addition, students should be able to check their own statuses, their course performances, their thesis versions, and the feedback from their teachers, tutors and reviewers. There should be a notification system that all parties except visitors can use to send messages to each other. To avoid a third-party blind-matching between students and teachers, students should be able to choose their course teachers and tutors. In this case, the notification system can be helpful, as are the professional profiles of teachers and tutors that can include names, phone numbers, professional titles and research backgrounds. Last but not least, students should be able to access their performance summaries and obtain comments from their tutors and reviewers.

Special services for course teachers can include student statuses, student performances, teacher performances, upload and refresh course materials, access to students' notes, homework uploaded by students, and final score printing and exporting. Various items can be included in students' performance table, such as absence, sick leave, business leave, e-learning of the courseware, forum participation, resources shared, IP addresses, etc. Possibly, course teachers need help from head teachers and sometimes department academic leaders to update students' statuses for in China course teachers usually have limited authority to give a leave of absence to students. IP addresses should match students' physical locations, and then may be used as supporting evidences against some cheating, especially during thesis writing process.

Tutors should be able to choose among the students who want to be supervised under them if students can choose their tutors. After the thesis writing course, students have some outline of their writing. When such information is available to tutors, they need to determine who they can help and how many students they can help. The number of students a tutor has should be displayed so that students can take advantage of that and make a decision; and an unavailable status

should also be immediately shown to students if a certain tutor is no longer available. Calculations should be carefully made so that every available tutor knows how many students he/she should/can have. Other services include students' profiles, students' course performances, notes, thesis versions, etc. On the platform, tutors and students should be able to exchange documents of doc, docx or pdf type. Since tutors work after course teachers, they need to be able to use course materials and writing software so that they can make a consistent and concerted effort.

When tutors have marked and commented on students' theses they can submit such finished papers to reviewers who are displayed on every tutor's page. The number of papers a reviewer can read should be decided beforehand; and the number of papers a reviewer can still accept should also be displayed on a tutor's page. Then reviewers have students' names, notes, drafts and theses on their page so that they can begin their work. Tutors' marks and comments may not be available to reviewers if an independent judgment is expected, although marks and comments should be made available to students when they check for them. Likewise, reviewers' marks and comments should also be available to students. All the marks and comments, if required by thesis forms, should be automatically extracted and filled in the corresponding tables. If certain students' theses are rejected by reviewers, then department academic leaders should receive such messages automatically sent by the system, together with the students' theses, thesis marks and thesis comments.

When a department academic leader has received the information of rejected papers from reviewers, he/she should be able to check everything related to these students' theses, and it is his/her responsibility to decide whether such theses go back to these students and demand rewrites or instead go ahead to the thesis defense. If students' theses are accepted and sent to thesis defense, the academic leader should then make another evaluation, which should also be automatically included in the thesis forms. Besides, the department academic leaders should have the authority to check both students' and teachers' performance summaries. They need to be able to browse every page so that they can monitor all the work and give advice whenever possible.

In China, course teachers, head teachers and department academic leaders all have the right to grant students leaves of absence. Such a service should be provided to them so that they can fulfil their responsibilities. The updated statuses of students should be able to be immediately shown to each party.

Online thesis defense can be an option. If not created on the platform, at least it can be done by combining video conferencing software and screen recording software. Thesis defense processes should be properly saved for the purpose of future supervision. This is almost cost-free as QQ offers free group video chatting service and there are very good free desktop recorders available. Such a service can save both time and money for students, and give them a stronger support for the pursuit of their own goals.

#### *4.2 Features*

The thesis writing platform is characteristic of integration, automaticity, user-orientation, a collection of writing tools, a source of knowledge, and an interactive community. It satisfies the needs for managing, learning, teaching, tutoring and reviewing; and department administrators, head teachers, course teachers, students, tutors and reviewers can cooperate to ensure that thesis writing is properly completed—all work made as legitimately automatic as possible. The roles played by different parties can be faithfully recorded by the system and automatically displayed in front of or submitted to any party concerned. Thesis forms can be automatically filled when relevant information appears in the specified places of the platform. The rest of the forms can be coordinated and completed online by students, tutors, reviewers and department administrators.

The platform is user-centered. Services are designed to assist and facilitate students' online learning where they can follow their class and check their own performances. Later, they can also complete their thesis writing and even perform thesis defense online. Course teachers can not only broadcast their classes, but manage students' performances. When students are on leave, such information can be immediately obtained as a result of the coordination from either head teachers or department leaders, and vice versa. Tutors and reviewers can also do their jobs online, saving time to call everybody for a meeting. Students, teachers and tutors are provided a collection of writing tools and online writing strategies, so that writing an English thesis in China can be practical and productive.

The platform can provide a useful tool to reduce thesis sophistication. Most language problems can be solved by a strategic combination of Google or Bing search engine, online dictionaries, online collocations dictionaries, online language corpora, digital English dictionaries on the local machine, online English-speaking natives, etc. An English Expression search tool based on Google, Bing, Yahoo, and Baidu, can also be developed to help students get accustomed to using online resources to self-edit their own writing. Documentation style software and thesis templates can help them with thesis formatting. Anti-plagiarism services and different communication tools

applicable on different devices can also be introduced to teachers and students for their convenience. All this will encourage students and tutors to focus their attention on thesis development.

In addition, the platform is also a source of knowledge and an interactive community that shares and creates knowledge. Students, course teachers, tutors, reviewers, and department academic leaders can anonymously collaborate in the building of a thesis writing community—thus embracing democracy and opening up the sources of knowledge.

## 5. Conclusion

On Chinese campuses, the school bureaucratic system is still prevalent and strong. The success of the online platform has to rely on a few key factors. First of all, the full consistent support of the department head who controls finance needs to be secured so that the platform infrastructure, the website development, its maintenance and upgrade can be guaranteed at all times. Second, the support of department academic leaders is very important. Without their full support, the mobilization and participation of students, course teachers, tutors, reviewers and head teachers cannot be guaranteed. In addition, a small institutional reform has to be installed as well in order to effectively evaluate the performances of students, course teachers, tutors, reviewers and head teachers. When all this is ensured, an active webmaster needs to be appointed to monitor the online activities and respond quickly to any possible request or problem. If the platform is realized and successfully executed, there will be many benefits: meaningful academic training, productive writing, lifelong learning ability, department cooperation, administrative efficiency and effectiveness, etc. Its development can be school-based, but with some added features it can also be business-based.

Such an automatic platform for teaching and tutoring undergraduate English majors to plan, write, and defend their required graduation theses can largely resolve the problems that have long haunted teachers, department administrators, and students. All the involved parties are mobilized to work together, being encouraged to use legitimate and constructive online resources, either already developed or still being harbored, to streamline the thesis-writing process and improve thesis quality—thus an opportunity to make real progress.

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