RAISING STUDENTS' AWARENESS OF CROSS-CULTURAL CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC IN ENGLISH WRITING VIA AN E-LEARNING COURSE

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This study investigated the potential impact of e-learning on raising overseas students' cultural awareness and explored the possibility of creating an interactive learning environment for them to improve their English academic writing. The study was based on a comparison of Chinese and English rhetoric in academic writing, including a comparison of Chinese students' writings in Chinese with native English speakers' writings in English and Chinese students' writings in English with the help of an e-course and Chinese students' writings in English without the help of an e-course. Five features of contrastive rhetoric were used as criteria for the comparison. The experimental results show that the group using the e-course was successful in learning about defined aspects of English rhetoric in academic writing, reaching a level of performance that equalled that of native English speakers. Data analysis also revealed that e-learning resources helped students to compare rhetorical styles across cultures and that the interactive learning environment was effective in improving overseas students' English academic writing.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is complex in that it involves more than grammar. It involves familiarity with the writing conventions of university culture and disciplinary subcultures in which the second/foreign language learner participates (Schneider & Fujishima, 1995). Ballard and Clanchy (1984) found that while a student is inducted into a particular discipline through lectures, discussions, and laboratory work, it is through the written assignments that success is most commonly judged.

Although foreign language proficiency is at the heart of writing, the real problem for overseas students is not language-related errors, but the fact that students have not met the expectations of the academic reader of the target language. Learners who come from communities that practise other forms of discourse, or communities in which literate discourse serves either no viable function or an entirely different purpose, are at a disadvantage, because they have not realised or accepted the registers and purposes of discourse in the academic community (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989; Stern, 1992).

For some overseas students, essays have to be written in the unfamiliar rhetorical styles of the target culture (Crowe & Peterson, 1995). An added complexity is that different cultural conventions are involved in academic argument. These conventions are important from the point of view of the teacher in that overseas students may have a logical orientation, but it may be perceived to be illogical to a reader anticipating a different culturally-constrained demonstration of logic.

Jordan (1997) looked at the writing difficulties of overseas postgraduates attending writing classes at a university in the U.K. The students were asked to comment on their own writing problems using a six-point scale, ranging from *no difficulties* to *a lot of difficulties*. The order of problem areas selected by the students (%) is listed below:

vocabulary	62%
style	53%
spelling	42%
grammar	38%
punctuation	18%
handwriting	12%

A similar questionnaire was given to the students' instructors. Their responses were as follows:

style	92%
grammar	77%
vocabulary	70%
handwriting	31%
punctuation	23%
spelling	23%

The results illustrate the mismatch between student and instructor perceptions of the problems associated with students' written work. Whereas students selected vocabulary as offering the greatest challenge (62%), instructors clearly indicated style as being of greatest concern (92%). Students generally underestimated their problems, with large discrepancies for style and grammar when compared with the instructors' perceptions. Clearly this academic barrier will lead to an escalation of academic culture shock for the overseas students, especially as it was not seen as a barrier by nearly 50% of the students surveyed.

Weir (1988) also conducted a wide-ranging survey of instructors and students that considered the writing difficulties of overseas students and concluded that the clarity of the message and the arrangement and development of written work were the most important criteria in tutors' assessments of written work. However, further research by Santos (1988), who investigated the reactions of 178 professors to two 400-word compositions, one of which was written by a Chinese student, revealed that lexical errors were the most serious problem for non-native speakers, suggesting that Jordan's students' perceptions may not be wholly incorrect.

Achieving success in a new culture does not, however, lie solely in learning the grammar and lexicon of the language. Ability to negotiate cultural barriers and develop new ways of learning are also essential. Teachers need to be familiar with the socio-cultural sources of the problems encountered by overseas students writing in a foreign language, including differences in rhetorical styles (Cai, 1993). As most overseas students bring with them linguistic, cultural, attitudinal, and academic experiences (Leki, 1992), and many of them already possess study skills at an advanced level in their own language, what they actually need is help in transferring these skills to the target language and adjusting them to a different academic environment (Jordan, 1997). The rationale for the development of the e-course described here was to lessen the impact of these cultural barriers by raising students' awareness of cross-cultural contrastive rhetoric and facilitating their academic writing in the target language.

Theoretical Bases

Contrastive rhetoric is the study of the differences that occur between the discourses of different languages and cultures as reflected in foreign students' writing. Kaplan (1966) suggested that all written languages contain a variety of organisational modes, and that native speakers recognise which modes to use and the consequences of their choices. However, he implied that the non-native speaker does not

possess a complete inventory of possible alternatives, does not recognise the sociolinguistic constraints of those alternatives, and does not know what constraints a choice imposes on the text. Kaplan's data were used (see Connor, 2002; Hinds, 1990; Hirose, 2003) to support contrastive rhetoric as a theory that dealt with foreign language learners' cultural barriers in their academic writing.

Such studies show how writers' cultural backgrounds influence their organisation of writing; what they choose to use as evidence in supporting their main ideas; how they express their main ideas; and how they write in the foreign language (Benda, 1999). They also show how different rhetorical preferences are reflected in textual organisation in different languages (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989). Contrastive rhetoric is also an area of research in second/foreign language learning that identifies problems in composition encountered by second/foreign language writers by referring them to the rhetorical strategies of the first language. It maintains that language and writing are cultural phenomena, and, as a direct consequence, each language has unique rhetorical conventions (Connor, 1996).

For foreign students, linguistic and cultural patterns transfer to their writing in the target language not only at the word and sentence level but also at the discourse level (Moran, 1991). Since their original styles may not work with the new tasks assigned by the target language teachers, they need to adapt to the new academic context which has its own conventions (Jordan, 1997). White (2001) explored the reasons why a student who has produced a grammatically acceptable text failed to fulfil the requirements of the writing task and indicated that cultural expectancies influence the perceived success or failure of written communication.

Learning to compose in a foreign language is not an isolated classroom activity, but a social and cultural experience. For example, the rules of English composition encapsulate values that are absent in, or sometimes contradictory to, the values of other societies. Likewise, the rules of Chinese writing reflect beliefs and values that may not be found in other societies. Therefore, learning the rules of composition in a foreign language is, to a certain extent, learning the values of the corresponding foreign society (Shen, 1989). The process of learning to write in the target language is a process of creating and defining a new identity and balancing it with the old identity.

The following five contrastive features were identified for study, based on the research of Ballard and Clanchy (1991), Cho (1999), Connor (1996), Cortazzi and Jin (1997), and Schneider and Fujishima (1995).

1. Inductive vs. Deductive (Presence and Placement of Thesis Statement)

A paper written in the preferred British or American deductive style, in which the main idea is stated first, would be considered poorly written in China, where the inductive pattern is more common, with background material given first to lead the reader to the main point (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). For the same reason, a Chinese student's delayed introduction of purpose makes the writing appear incoherent to the English-speaking reader (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Connor, 1996). Matalene (1985) argued, based on sample essays written by Chinese ESL students in China, that arguments are often delayed and statements sometimes seem unconnected in the eyes of the Western reader. Scarcella (1984) examined the function of initial sentences in native- and non-native English-speaking American university freshman essays and found that non-native speakers tended to use longer but less effective "orientations" (i.e., introductions to the topic). Schneider and Fujishima (1995) also claim that, at the discourse level, the Chinese student has learned the technique of starting with a broad topic and gradually narrowing it down to the focus of the paper.

It is possible to judge whether an essay is inductive or deductive by looking at the presence and placement of the thesis statement, as Cho (1999) suggests. A thesis statement is defined as a sentence summarising the fundamental argument of an essay (Megginson, 1996). Therefore, if the thesis statement is placed at

the beginning of the introduction or in the first paragraph, the essay is assumed to be deductive, and if not, it might be either inductive or quasi-inductive.

2. "Start-Sustain-Turn-Sum" vs. "Introduction-Body-Conclusion" (Number of Paragraphs)

It is claimed that Chinese rhetorical style consists of a four-part pattern: *qi* ('start, open') establishes the field or prepares the reader for the topic; *cheng* ('carry on, sustain') introduces and develops the topic; *zhuan* ('turn') turns to a seemingly unrelated subject or looks at the problem from another angle; and *he* ('conclude') sums up the essay whereby the author's opinion is established or hinted at (Connor, 1996; Grabe & Kaplan, 1998; Hinds, 1990; Swales, 1990). This pattern is believed to have originated historically in Chinese poetry (Tsao, 1983). Differently from the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* pattern, the English way of structuring an essay, though its structure is flexible, normally includes introduction, body and conclusion. English essays generally place more emphasis on form than do Chinese essays. Each part has its distinct function: the introduction brings out the theme, the middle contains the argument with its supporting evidence, and the ending summarises the essay. Chinese writing places the emphasis more on the whole: it is more synthetic, more changeable, and there is no clear-cut separation between the parts. Also, Chinese rhetorical style is not very strict about the need for coherent links between parts. It relies more heavily on the reader's interpretation.

The structural pattern of an essay can be determined by looking at the number and function of the paragraphs. Cho (1999) proposes that "the total and average numbers of paragraphs may reflect the general structure of the essay that each group of students intended to construct" (p. 23). From this view, comparing numbers and functions of paragraphs may reveal rhetorical differences between the two groups and contribute to the identification of the rhetorical style of an essay.

3. Circular vs. Linear (Topic Sentences and Topic Changes)

Kaplan (1966) suggested that Anglo-European expository essays follow a linear development, whereas in Chinese the paragraph development may be said to be "turning and turning in a widening gyre." The circles or gyres turn around the subject and show it from a variety of tangential views, but the subject is never looked at directly. Ostler (1997) demonstrated that 89% of essays by native speakers of American English in her study put the theme at the beginning of the essay. Because of their familiarity with the Anglo-European linear style, many Western teachers find Asian students' essays confusing, either because there is no topic sentence in a paragraph or because too many things are mentioned within one paragraph. As a result, they commonly comment that a paragraph is irrelevant, illogical, or unclear. Shen (1989) claimed that the essential rule for English logical organisation is the use of a topic sentence, whereas the essential structural rule for Chinese composition is to proceed from the surface to the core. Young (1994) contended that the *qi-chen-zhuan-he* pattern continues to influence Chinese writing, and Western readers might see Chinese style as circular starts, tangential views, and subdued stances. In Eason's (1995) study, Chinese students employed topic-comment structure, delayed introduction of purpose, and abruptly shifted their viewpoint. None of the American students exhibited topic-comment structure or delayed introduction of purpose.

Circularity can be measured by looking at the frequency of topic changes in paragraphs where topic sentences are used. Linearity can be indicated by a low frequency of topic changes or a low average number of topic sentences in a paragraph.

4. Metaphorical vs. Straightforward (Use of Metaphors and Proverbs)

In China, one of the important criteria for grading writing is the use of allusion, analogy, and proverbs, since their usage is thought to contribute to the beauty of the language (Chen & Chung, 1994). ESL/EFL teachers often comment that their students use patterns of language and stylistic conventions that they have learnt in their native languages and cultures. This transfer is not just idiosyncratic variation but involves recurring patterns of organisation and rhetorical conventions reminiscent of writing in the

students' native language and culture (Connor, 1996, p. 3). Matalene (1985) found that Chinese students are fond of fixed patterns such as proverbs, idioms, maxims, literary allusions, and analogies, and also defer to tradition and to the authority of the past. In contrast, Western readers regard these patterns as clichés, and Western teachers of writing encourage students to write in their own voice using their own words.

The elusiveness of allusions, analogies, and proverbs allows, or even encourages, more than one interpretation of their meaning. Whether it is or is not desirable to use metaphors and proverbs is open to debate, but this is one of the areas where contrastive differences in rhetoric can be examined.

5. Explicit Discourse Markers (Marks of Coherence and Unity)

English essays use explicit discourse markers to signal relations between sentences and parts of texts. These devices are words or phrases that act as aids to help readers make connections between what has already been stated and what is forthcoming (Connor, 1996). Comparisons are based on the counts of these logical devices within texts. It is through devices such as these that the writer is able to organise ideas and help readers follow along from one sentence to another (Byram, 1989). English readers expect and require landmarks of coherence and unity as they read. They believe that the writer needs to provide transitional statements. In Chinese, the beauty of writing is believed to lie in delicacy and subtlety, not in its straightforwardness (Shen & Yao, 1999). The Chinese language places emphasis on coherence of meaning rather than coherence of form. As long as ideas are flowing, it does not matter whether there is coherent form, for, as the proverb goes, "Every river flows into the sea." This underlying attitude toward writing affects the way textual information is organised and the techniques employed to implement the writing task.

Discourse markers are also called "signposts" or "transitions." They give the appearance that logical connections exist between sentences, paragraphs and sections of the essay and allow readers to piece together ideas into a logically coherent argument. Burstein, Kukich, Wolff, Lu and Chodorow (1998) used discourse markers, in addition to syntactic information and topical content vector analyses, to mark essays because the total number of discourse markers reflects the general coherence and unity of the essay. Comparing the number of such markers should reveal rhetorical differences between the groups.

Because L2 writers bring with them various cultural experiences that affect their writing, EFL teaching may not be successful if the underlying culture in the first language (L1) is not addressed, or if contrasts between L1 and L2 writing structures are not made sufficiently explicit. Students need to know not only the forms of language, but also the cultural constraints associated with the forms and the consequences of selecting a particular form. Understanding those contrastive aspects of two cultures may constitute the first step for ESL/EFL students to attain sensitivity to common errors traceable to their first language and culture. Approaches such as contrastive rhetoric provide a mechanism through which teachers may gain understanding of the problems faced by their students when trying to learn how to produce a coherent and cohesive text in L2 (Kaplan, 1990).

METHOD

Research Questions

The first research question focuses on the rhetorical styles of Chinese and UK writers and asks: what are the differences in style, as measured by the indicators discussed, between UK and Chinese writers? Clearly, a failure to demonstrate measurable differences would undermine the theory outlined in the preceding sections.

The second research question deals with the attainments of a group of 60 PhD students who have studied academic English, and asks: using the five measures outlined above, have these students already attained

a rhetorical style close to that used by UK writers, or does their English writing remain indistinguishable from that of other Chinese writers who have studied less or no English?

The third research question concerns the success of the training course that is designed to shift the students' style of writing closer to that of UK writers: is the training course successful in shifting student performance, and does the additional access to the associated e-course produce additional benefits?

Participants

Altogether 90 Chinese students and 15 English university lecturers participated in this study. Sixty students who were PhD candidates majoring in natural sciences at the Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT), China, were assigned to the Study Group. They were randomly assigned to an Experimental Group (N = 30) or a Control Group (N = 30) during the training phase. Students from both the Experimental and the Control Groups had four hours of English language instruction per week (two hours for listening/speaking and two hours for reading/writing). In addition, the Experimental Group used the e-course for academic writing for supplementary instruction. Students in the Experimental Group were expected to spend twenty minutes every other week for each unit in the e-course. If students completed the assignment in less than twenty minutes, they could log out or use more time to follow further comparisons and discussions online.

In addition, 30 Chinese students majoring in Chinese language studies (the Chinese Writers Group), provided a baseline for identifying rhetorical features in Chinese. Fifteen of these students were from Harbin Teachers' University and 15 were from Heilongjiang University. All of them were in their final year of undergraduate studies.

Fifteen lecturers from Salford (the UK Writers Group) were teaching a basic foundation English course and most of their students were Chinese. Their essays were used as an English baseline for comparison with the writing style of the non-native speakers (NNS).

The E-Learning Course

An e-learning environment for the teaching of English academic writing was designed and implemented at the Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT) and Salford University. The objectives of the e-course were:

- to raise awareness of differences in rhetorical styles;
- to facilitate students' academic writing in the target language (English)

to encourage social interaction among peers, between students and tutors and between EFL students and native speakers of English.

The five contrastive rhetorical features were explained in the e-course, and opportunities for interaction among participants were provided through the use of synchronous chat room facilities, including occasional use of Web video cameras, and asynchronous e-mail and bulletin boards.

The curriculum content of the e-course is summarised in Table 1.

The students wrote an essay every other week during the study, going through the same process each time. During the writing process, students sent their first drafts to the e-course bulletin board and compared them with the Western linear vs. Chinese non-linear rhetorical organization templates, which were displayed in the discussion area of the e-course system. The tutor provided feedback on the students' performance so that all members could look at both the draft essay and the tutor's comments. Students were encouraged to send their comments on their peers' work to the online discussion. They could also compare their own essays and those of their peers with essays written by Salford University lecturers, and then synchronously or asynchronously discuss essential aspects of the topic with native speakers before producing the final version of their own essays. This interactive procedure is shown in Figure 1.

Table 1. Curriculum Content of the e-Course.

	Instructions	**Activities**
Week 1-2 Theme/thesis statement	definition of thesis statement and its functions	• read the model essays and identify thesis statement • read the model essays with thesis statements omitted and insert an appropriate statement • read the model essays with thesis statements taken out and write appropriate thesis statements • write an essay of approximately 400 words on the topic of "Autonomy and control in higher education" with emphasis on the placement of theme/thesis statement.
Week 3-4 Topic sentences	definition of topic sentence and its functions	• select the topic sentence in each paragraph in the model essays • compare the selected sentences with the original and see if they are identical? Similar? • read the model essays with topic sentences left out and insert appropriate topic sentences • read the model essays with topic sentences taken out and write appropriate topic sentences • write an essay of approximately 400 words on the topic of "The use of internet in higher education" with one topic sentence in each paragraph.
Week 5-6 Structure	introduction, main body, conclusion and their functions	• read model essays without paragraph division and divide the essays into paragraphs • write three paragraphs with one for the introduction, one for the body, and one for the conclusion • write an essay of approximately 400 words on the topic of "Advantages and disadvantages of online university degree programs" with a three-or-four paragraph essay consisting of an introduction, main body and conclusion.
Week 7-8 Paragraphs	definition of paragraphs and their functions	• read the model essays presented in one paragraph and divide them into paragraphs • write a four-paragraph essay with a topic sentence in each paragraph.
Week 9-10 Discourse markers	definition of discourse markers and their functions	• identify all the discourse markers in a sample essay • explain how their omission would affect the essay. • write an essay of approximately 400 words on the topic of "What do you think of the English courses at universities?" with an emphasis on discourse markers.

The contrastive features displayed on the bulletin board were available to all students in the Experimental Group. These features and the pre-experiment analysis of the students' essays were displayed as text, charts and graphs, with figures presented in different colours that contrasted the Chinese and English styles. Tutors made comments about content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics, with an emphasis on the English writing style, and sent them to the bulletin board. Model essays produced by

native speakers of English had the five different contrastive features marked with different colours to help students identify the particular features.
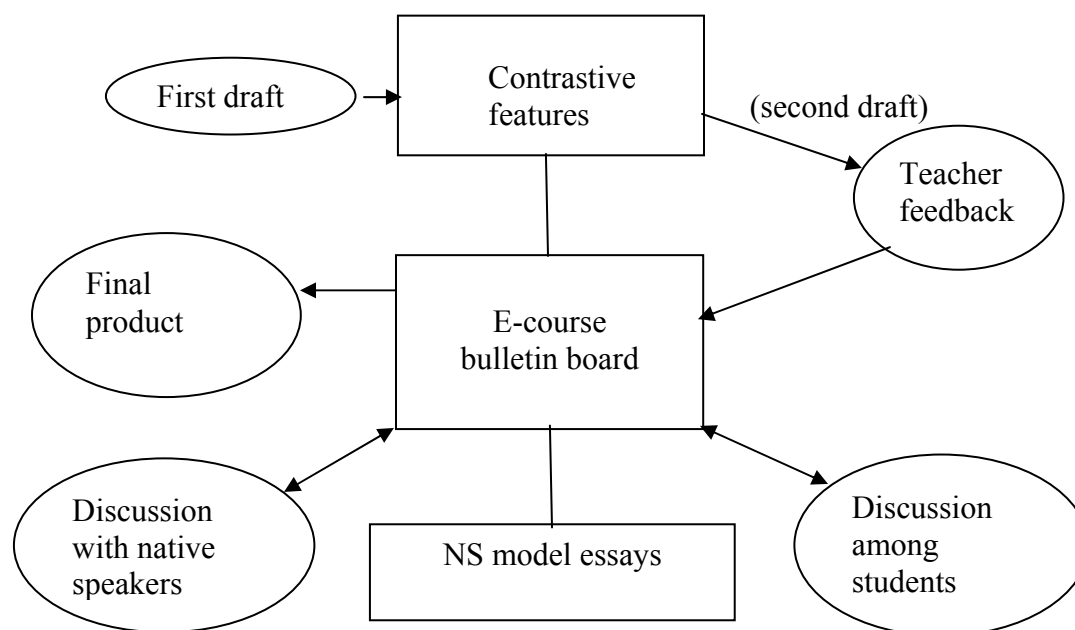
Writing process in the e-course

Figure 1. The writing process in the e-course.

If there was anything they did not understand, or if they needed clarification, students could write to native speakers, peers, or tutors for additional assistance. After consultation, they sent the discussed points to the bulletin board for everybody to read. The process of reformulation (rewriting, revising) of essays with reference to contrastive features, teacher and peer feedback, model essays, and interactions with native speakers, was intended to facilitate changes in the way in which the essays were constructed, gradually shaping students' writing style to reflect features associated with English academic writing.

The communication between Chinese students and English native speakers allowed students to observe, compare and analyse parallel materials from their respective cultures. They could exchange viewpoints in a reciprocal way and gain an ever-deepening understanding of the other culture, thereby expanding their cross-cultural analysis.

Online discussions in a risk-free environment, brainstorming and categorizing, and debriefing are examples of instructional methods that allowed learners to examine their understanding of course objectives through interaction with other individuals. Learners were encouraged to test their ideas against alternative views and alternative contexts. Within this cognitive construction approach, other people are considered to be a source of conflict that stimulates new thinking. Cooperative learning creates opportunities to form communities of inquiry that in turn encourage critical dialogue.

Materials

Materials for Studying the Contrastive Rhetorical Features

Immediately before the start of the writing course for the Harbin PhD students, three sets of essays were analysed: Chinese essays produced by the Chinese Writers Group (30 essays); English essays by the UK Writers Group (15 essays); and the first essays in English by the 60 PhD students in the Study Group,

which was later randomly divided into the Control Group (30 essays) and Experimental Group (30 essays). These essays were analysed for the five features of contrastive rhetoric to explore the following:

- the difference between essay writing styles in Chinese and English;
- a baseline description of the essay writing style of the Study Group;

a "norm" for essay writing by English native speakers.

Materials for the E-course

The materials used in the e-course came from three sources: the model English essays designed for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS, published by Cambridge University Press); the model English essays by the UK Writers Group; and English essays written by Chinese students in the Study Group. In addition, during the learning process, students' essays were consistently uploaded into the e-course as an input to trigger online discussion and feedback from both the tutor and other English native speakers. Students' final draft essays were also uploaded into the e-course so that everybody could see what improvements had been achieved.

Assessment

In the pre-training period of this study, all the students from the Study Group wrote an essay of about 400 words on the title of "*What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of higher education and to what extent have you benefited from higher education?"* Their essays were analysed according to the five contrastive rhetoric features. To obtain a comparative view, the essays by the UK Writers Group and those from the Chinese Writers Group, all on the same topic, were analysed to compare their contrastive features.

The Study Group was then randomly divided into the Control Group and the Experimental Group (which had access to the e-learning course). Both the first (pre e-course) and last essays of the Control and Experimental Groups were analysed to determine shifts in writing style during the e-course training period.

For the purpose of this research, the same definitions of terms were applied to all sets of data (English and Chinese). The method proved useful in that it revealed rhetorical patterns from the two cultures. The principal researcher coded the essay data for the position of thesis statement, presence of topic sentences, number of paragraphs, use of metaphors and number of discourse markers for later statistical analysis (see Appendix). In addition, two lecturers at HIT also coded the rhetorical features of all essays. Cronbach's Alpha for inter-rater reliability was 0.87 with inter-rater correlations of 0.6, 0.7, and 0.8. The data from the experimental study on the e-course for writing style were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

RESULTS

Pre-Training Results

The initial analysis was conducted to determine the pre-course, base level scores for the five aspects of rhetorical style for the three main groups: Chinese writers, UK writers, and the 60 Chinese students of English (Study Group), who would later be randomly assigned to the Experimental and Control Groups for the training period.

The comparisons of words and paragraphs are interval data, and were evaluated by ANOVA and t-tests, whereas presence of metaphors and topic changes in the groups, and the position of the thesis statement are categorical data and were evaluated by Crosstabs analysis, which uses Chi-square to determine significance. The three groups of writers had different levels of education and writing competence, and it was anticipated that the length of the essays would vary. Therefore, before comparisons were made, essay length was checked for statistically significant differences across the groups. The results of the ANOVA,

comparing the four groups, are presented in Table 2, together with post-hoc *Bonferroni t*-test results. The ANOVA was statistically significant, $F(3,101) = 12.16$, $p < 0.001$, and the post-hoc tests indicated that there were significant differences between the Experimental and Control Groups when compared with the Chinese writers group. Therefore, for interval data comparisons between the groups that were found to have different word totals, the count of discourse markers and paragraphs was standardised at a rate per 100 words.

Table 2. Comparison of Essay Word Totals

Between Subjects ANOVA					Bonferroni post-hoc *t*-tests, *p* values		
		N	*M*	*SD*	2	3	4
1	Experimental	30	414.27	45.68	*p*=1.00(NS)	*p*=0.47(NS)	*p*<0.01
2	Control	30	417.80	45.77		*p*=0.67(NS)	*p*=0.01
3	UK	15	451.00	107.29			*p*=0.70(NS)
4	Chinese	30	504.07	71.55			
ANOVA, *F* (3,101) = 12.16, *p* < 0.001							

In order to determine the extent to which the e-course could help students adjust to the English rhetorical style, it was necessary to confirm that, with the measures used in this study, there were real differences between the English style of writing of the UK writers and the Chinese style of the Chinese students. The experimental hypothesis was that on the measures used to evaluate rhetorical styles there would be statistically significant differences between the UK and Chinese writers. The results of the statistical tests are shown in Table 3. Statistically significant differences were observed for all measures, confirming that there are differences in those aspects of the style of writing, which are the subject of this investigation, for UK subjects writing in English and Chinese subjects writing in Chinese. The UK writers used significantly more discourse markers and paragraphs and tended not to use metaphors or change topics within a paragraph. They also usually indicated the main thesis of the essay within the first paragraph. These results confirm previous results in the field of comparative rhetoric.

Table 3. Comparison of Rhetorical Style in Essays Written by UK and Chinese Writers

		UK vs Chinese Writers			
		N	*M*		*p* value
Discourse Markers	UK	15	16.47	$t(15)=11.59$	*p*<0.01
	Chinese	30	1.73		
Paragraphs	UK	15	5.10	$t(18)=2.75$	p=0.01
	Chinese	30	4.00		
		N	%		*p* value
Metaphors	UK	15	86.70	$\chi^2(1)=11.38$	*p*<0.01
	Chinese	30	33.30		
Topic Changes	UK	15	100.00	$\chi^2(1)=7.28$	*p*<0.01
	Chinese	30	63.30		
Thesis Statement	UK	15	60.00	$\chi^2(1)=19.45$	*p*<0.01
	Chinese	30	16.70		

The essence of the study was the investigation of changes in rhetorical style of a group of students who received different training regimes. However, change can only be expected if the students perform at a different level when compared with UK writers and Chinese writers. Table 4 compares the pre-training essays of the Study Group with the UK writers, and shows that significant differences exist between the groups on 4 of the 5 measures, and that change may be expected to occur on these 4 measures.

Table 4. Comparison of Rhetorical Style in Pre-Training Study Group with UK Writers

		Combined Study Group vs UK Writers			
		N	***M***		***p* value**
Discourse Markers	Study	60	10.48	$t(16)=-4.63$	$p<0.01$
	UK	15	16.47		
Paragraphs	Study	60	3.97	$t(16)=-2.90$	p=0.01
	UK	15	5.10		
		N	**%**		***p* value**
Metaphors	Study	60	60.00	$\chi^2(1)=3.77$	p=0.05
	UK	15	86.70		
Topic Changes	Study	60	85.00	$\chi^2(1)=2.56$	p=0.11(NS)
	UK	15	100.00		
Thesis Statement	Study	60	28.30	$\chi^2(1)=8.59$	p=0.04
	UK	15	60.00		

Table 5 compares the pre-training essays of the Study Group with the Chinese writers, and shows that significant differences exist between the groups on 4 of the 5 measures. This indicates that members of the Study Group have already changed their style of writing when compared with the Chinese writers. For three of the measures (discourse markers, paragraphs, metaphors) their style is significantly different from both Chinese and UK writers. There are fewer topic changes in the essays of the Study Group making them indistinguishable as a group, in a statistical sense, from the UK writers. However, in terms of placement of the thesis statement, they remain similar to the Chinese writers.

Table 5. Comparison of Rhetorical Style in Pre-Training Study Group with Chinese Writers

		Combined Study Group vs Chinese Writers			
		N	***M***		***p* value**
Discourse Markers	Study	60	2.56	$t(78)=21.37$	$p<0.01$
	Chinese	30	0.34		
Paragraphs	Study	60	0.96	$t(88)=3.46$	p<0.01
	Chinese	30	0.81		
		N	**%**		***p* value**
Metaphors	Study	60	60.00	$\chi^2(1)=5.69$	p<0.02
	Chinese	30	33.30		
Topic Changes	Study	60	85.00	$\chi^2(1)=5.43$	p=0.02
	Chinese	30	63.30		
Thesis Statement	Study	60	28.30	$\chi^2(3)=3.94$	p=0.27(NS)
	Chinese	30	16.70		

The Study Group of 60 students was randomly divided into an Experimental and Control Group during the training phase. The two groups were compared on pre-training essays to ensure equality of initial performance. The results indicate that for all the measures of rhetorical style used in this study there were no initial differences between the Experimental and Control Groups (Table 6).

Table 6. Comparison of Rhetorical Style in Essays Written by Experimental and Control Groups

		Experimental vs Control Groups			
		N	***M***		***p* value**
Discourse Markers	Experimental	30	10.30	$t(58)=-0.57$	$p=0.57$(NS)
	Control	30	10.67		
Paragraphs	Experimental	30	4.00	$t(58)=0.32$	p=0.74(NS)
	Control	30	3.93		
		N	**%**		***p* value**
Metaphors	Experimental	30	60.00	$\chi^2(1)=0.00$	$p=1.00$(NS)
	Control	30	60.00		
Topic Changes	Experimental	30	86.70	$\chi^2(1)=0.13$	$p=0.72$(NS)
	Control	30	83.30		
Thesis Statement	Experimental	30	30.00	$\chi^2(5)=9.18$	$p=0.10$(NS)
	Control	30	26.70		

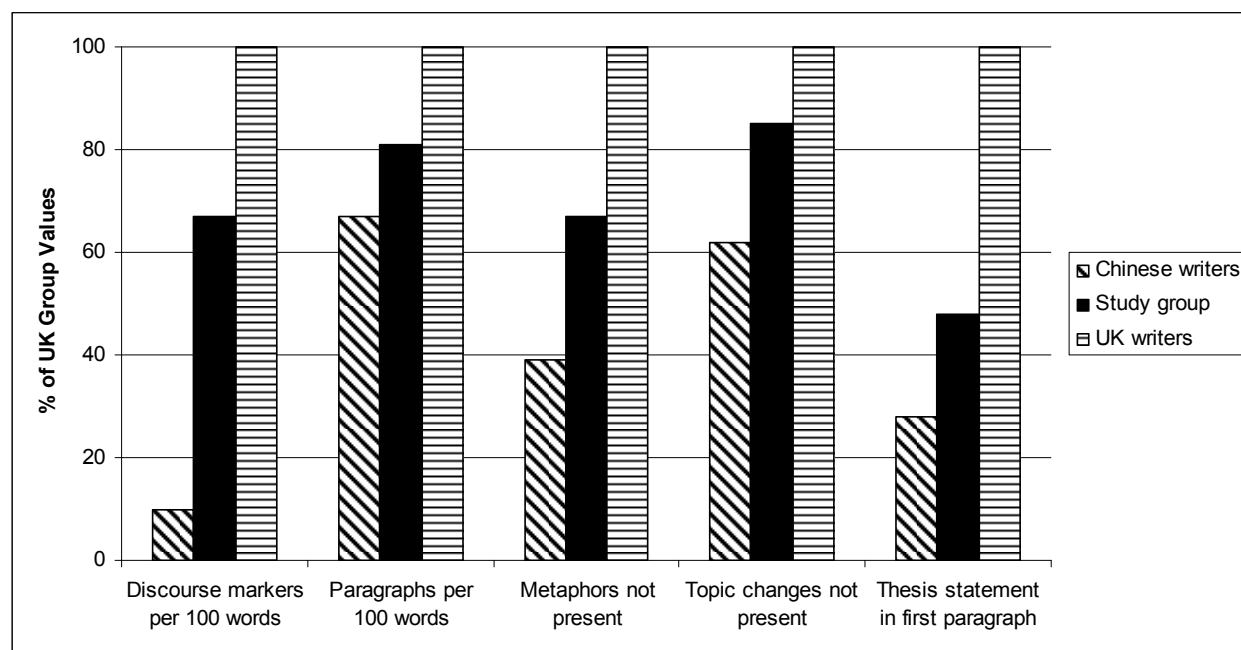The results from Tables 2 to 6 are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Pre-training values on five measures of rhetorical style for the Chinese Writers Group (30 subjects), Study Group (60 subjects), and UK Writers Group (15 subjects), expressed as percentage of UK Writers Group scores.

Post-Training Results

During the training period (September, 2002 – January, 2003) the Control Group did not use the e-course, which provided the Experimental Group with learning materials about contrastive rhetoric features and opportunities to discuss their writing with peers, the tutors, and native speakers of English.

Post-training phase essays were analysed to determine the change that had occurred during the training period and the extent to which they were comparable with the UK writers' style. Table 7 shows the results of the ANOVA comparing the total words in essays of the Experimental and Control Groups and UK writers. There was no statistical difference in total words between the groups, $F(2,74) = 0.84$, $p = 0.44$.

Table 7. Comparison of Post-training Essay Word Totals

	N	M	SD
Experimental	30	456.90	38.99
Control	30	436.53	50.00
UK	15	451.00	107.29
ANOVA, F (2,74) = 0.84, p = 0.44			

Table 8 shows the ANOVA results comparing discourse markers for the Experimental and Control Groups and UK writers. There is a statistical difference between the groups, $F(2,74) = 31.95$, $p < 0.001$. Bonferroni post-hoc tests show that the e-course group has more than closed the gap between their pre-training phase performance and that of the UK writers, to the extent that they now significantly exceeded the UK writers' use of discourse markers. However, the Control Group used significantly fewer markers than either the Experimental Group or the UK writers.

Table 8. Comparison of Post-Training Number of Discourse Markers

		Between Subjects ANOVA			Bonferroni post-hoc *t*-tests, *p* values	
		N	M	SD	2	3
1	Experimental	30	19.67	2.12	p<0.01	p<0.01
2	Control	30	13.67	2.28		p=0.01
3	UK	15	16.47	4.86		
ANOVA: F (2,74) = 31.95, p < 0.001						

Table 9 shows the ANOVA results comparing the number of paragraphs for the Experimental and Control Groups and UK writers. There is a statistical difference between the groups, $F(2,74) = 14.43$, $p < 0.001$. *Bonferroni* post-hoc tests show that the e-course has closed the gap between the Experimental Group and the UK writers to the extent that they have again significantly exceeded the UK writers' use of paragraphs. There is, however, no significant difference between the Control Group and UK writers.

Table 9. Comparison of Post-Training Number of Paragraphs

		Between Subjects ANOVA			Bonferroni post-hoc *t*-tests, *p* values	
		N	M	SD	2	3
1	Experimental	30	6.03	0.72	p<0.01	p=0.02
2	Control	30	4.60	4.60		p=0.33(NS)
3	UK	15	5.13	5.13		
ANOVA: F (2,74) = 14.43, p < 0.001						

Tables 10, 11 and 12 show the comparisons for use of metaphors, changes of topic within a paragraph and the position of the thesis statement. The Experimental Group's use of metaphors remained significantly different from the style of the UK Writers Group's essays, $\chi^2 (1) = 6.67$, $p < 0.01$, as did the Control Group's use of this feature, $\chi^2 (1) = 4.05$, $p < 0.04$. However, there was no reduction in the number of students changing topics in a paragraph, $\chi^2 (2) = 3.75$, $p < 0.15$, because the group had already adopted this approach to their English writing style, as indicated in the pre-training data. The position of the thesis paragraph, for which the pre-training scores were closer to the Chinese writers, also changed significantly for the Experimental Group when compared with the Control Group, $\chi^2 (5) = 14.66$, $p < 0.01$, with 66.7% placing the thesis statement in the first paragraph, compared with 28.3% before the experiment. However, both groups did not show a statistically significant difference when compared with the UK writers.

Table 10. Comparison of Post-Training Metaphors

	UK vs Experimental and Control Groups			
	N	**%**		***p* value**
UK	15	86.70		
Experimental	30	46.70	$\chi^2(2)=6.88$	$p=0.03$
Control	30	56.70		
	UK vs Experimental			
UK	15	86.70	$\chi^2(1)=6.67$	$p=0.01$
Experimental	30	46.70		
	UK vs Control			
UK	15	86.70	$\chi^2(1)=4.05$	$p=0.04$
Control	30	56.70		
	Control vs Experimental			
Experimental	30	46.70	$\chi^2(1)=0.60$	$p=0.44$(NS)
Control	30	56.70		

Note: % = the percentage of the group not using metaphors

Table 11. Comparison of Post-Training Topic Changes

	UK vs Experimental and Control Groups			
	N	**%**		***p* value**
UK	15	100.00		
Experimental	30	86.70	$\chi^2(2)=3.75$	$p=0.15$(NS)
Control	30	83.30		

Table 12. Comparison of Post-Training Thesis Statement

	UK vs Experimental and Control Groups			
	N	**%**		***p* value**
UK	15	60.00		
Experimental	30	66.70	$\chi^2(8)=22.20$	$p=0.01$
Control	30	43.30		
	UK vs Experimental			
UK	15	60.00	$\chi^2(6)=9.57$	$p=0.14$(NS)
Experimental	30	66.70		
	UK vs Control			
UK	15	60.00	$\chi^2(5)=7.95$	$p=0.16$(NS)
Control	30	43.30		
	Control vs Experimental			
Experimental	30	66.70	$\chi^2(5)=14.66$	$p<0.01$
Control	30	43.30		

These results of Tables 8 to 12 are summarised in Figure 3, which shows the post-training results for the Control and Experimental Groups relative to the performance of the Chinese writers and UK writers.
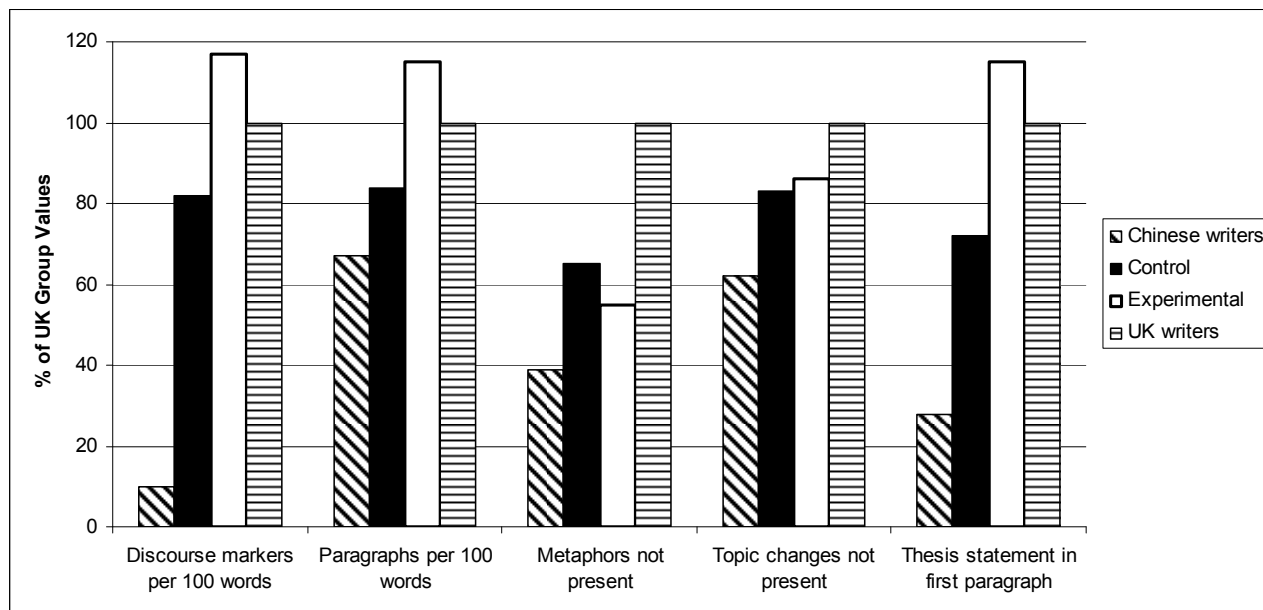
Figure 3. Post-training values on five measures of rhetorical style for the Chinese Writers, Control Group, Experimental (E-learning) Group, and UK Writers Group, expressed as percentage of UK Group scores.

Student Questionnaire

A questionnaire was administered immediately after the course to the Experimental Group to assess attitudes to various aspects of the e-course. The questionnaire contained ten questions; the first eight questions were multiple choice requiring a single choice to be selected, and the last two questions were open-ended questions for students to express their own opinions and judgment.

The questionnaire was constructed to:

- elicit students' perceptions about the advantages and disadvantages of using the e-course in their EFL learning process;
- to determine the extent to which the subjects felt they benefited from the e-course;

to gather ideas on how the e-course could be improved.

The questionnaire and summary data are presented in Table 13.

DISCUSSION

In response to the first research question, the results show that there are differences in rhetorical style between the UK and Chinese writers on all the measures used in the study. The Chinese writers used fewer discourse markers and paragraphs, and there was more use of metaphors in the Chinese group and a greater tendency to change topics within paragraphs. A much smaller proportion of Chinese writers (17%) had a thesis statement in the first paragraph when compared with the English writers (60%).

Table 13. Responses to Questionnaire

		Frequency **N=30**	**%**
Q.1	**From which of the following do you think you have benefited most in the e-course?**		
a	Contrastive features.	21	70
b	Native speaker model essays.	3	10
c	Drafting process.	3	10
d	Tutor's feedback.	3	10
Q. 2	**Which of the following methods do you think worked well in the e-course?**		
a	Demonstration of contrastive features and model essays in text only.	1	3
b	Demonstration of contrastive features and model essays in text + charts/graphs.	4	13
c	Communicating with peers, tutors, native speaker with text + voice.	20	67
d	Communicating with peers, tutors, native speaker with text + camera.	5	17
Q. 3	**How do you evaluate the materials provided in this e-course?**		
a	They are not sufficient.	25	83
b	They are too many to digest.	2	7
c	They are above/below my level.	2	7
d	They are just right.	1	3
Q. 4	**What do you think of the model essays on the e-course?**		
a	It is quicker and more cost effective to get them from the e-course than from books or handouts.	22	73
b	It is most useful to have different colours and symbols for different rhetoric features.	1	3
c	It provides the flexibility to read more or fewer model essays than are necessary to meet individual needs.	5	17
d	The presentation format is easy to understand.	2	7
Q. 5	**What do you think of the online communication with peers?**		
a	It was easy for me to see if I am better or worse than my peers.	4	13
b	It was good as I can challenge the ideas from my peers.	1	3
c	It was good for communicating with the tutor in less formal settings.	5	17
d	It was no better than communicating with tutors and native speakers.	20	67
Q. 6	**What do you think of the online communication with tutors?**		
a	It was quicker to get the tutor's feedback online than from class.	5	17
b	It was more convenient to communicate with the tutor online than to go to the tutor's office.	4	13
c	It was less formal but more helpful to get tutor's feedback online.	4	13
d	It was less scaring than face to face with the tutor.	17	57
Q. 7	**What do you think of the online communication with the native English speakers?**		
a	It is a better method to acquire the target culture than from books.	5	17
b	It will be more beneficial if the online communication is more frequent.	18	60
c	It does not provide what I need.	1	3
d	It does not help as the native speakers do not have tutors' expertise.	6	20
Q. 8	**How do you evaluate the e-course?**		
a	It is useful in that it functions in an interactive way.	27	91
b	It is less stressful to use than work in class.	1	3
c	It is more fun to play with.	1	3
d	It is not as useful as a class with a teacher.	1	3

The aim of the study was to determine the extent to which members of the Study Group changed their rhetorical style during the training phase, but this was predicated on the assumption that the Study Group had not already assumed a rhetorical style that was indistinguishable from that of the UK writers. Comparisons between the Study Group and UK writers showed that on four of the measures of rhetorical style the Study Group can be distinguished from the UK writers, but that for one measure, having one topic per paragraph, the group had shifted towards the style adopted by the UK writers (see Table 4). When compared with the Chinese writers (see Table 5), the Study Group was also significantly different on four measures, showing that their writing style had changed during their studies of English on most of the measures considered in this study, shifting away from the style associated with the Chinese writers, except for the tendency not to place the thesis statement in the first paragraph. However, they had still not achieved a style that was indistinguishable from the UK writers except for the tendency to have one topic per paragraph. Therefore, change in rhetorical style on four of the measures, especially position of the thesis statement that had remained close to the style adopted by the Chinese writers, was possible for the Study Group.

The post-training results (see Tables 8 to 12) show that the course, which was designed to shift the rhetorical style of the Study Group towards that of the UK writers, was successful in this endeavour. For the Control Group this occurred for two of the four measures (number of paragraphs, position of thesis paragraph) For the Experimental Group, which had the added benefit of the e-course, this move towards the UK writers' style occurred on three of the measures (number of discourse markers, number of paragraphs, position of thesis paragraph). For each of these measures, the difference between the Control Group and the Experimental Group was statistically significant. However, for the Experimental Group, the shift was such that it remained distinguishable from the UK Writers Group on two measures by virtue of the participants' tendency to use more discourse markers and paragraphs than the UK group. This difference between the UK writers and the Experimental Group was statistically significant, with the Experimental Group now having higher rates of use.

These results show that even without access to the e-course the participants in the training scheme changed their writing style so that it became similar to the UK writers in terms of the number of paragraphs and position of the thesis statement. Students without access to the e-course, although they did increase their use of discourse markers, still used them at levels below those observed with the UK writers. The effect of e-course provision for the Experimental group was to boost levels of performance to the extent that their essays may be perceived to have a slightly exaggerated level of discourse markers and paragraphs compared to the UK writers.

The use of metaphors in writing appears to be a characteristic that participants in both Control and Experimental Groups were reluctant to give up. After participation in the training scheme, there was still a significant difference in the use of metaphors when both groups were compared with the UK writers (see Table 10).

There is a clear indication from the questionnaire that the students were aware that knowledge of different rhetorical styles will assist their academic writing. The majority of students (Q.1: 70%) identified contrastive features as the most beneficial feature of the course, which accords with the observation from tutors that the group needed to gain a deeper understanding of differences in writing styles.

The e-course shifted the focus of the training period from instruction to individual learning, giving students more opportunities than their Control Group peers to assimilate the new contrastive features and refine their cognitive representations of a UK rhetorical style by interacting with a virtual social world. Almost all the students found the e-course useful because it provided opportunities for interaction (Q.8: 91%). In the e-course learning environment, each individual student was able to play the dual role of participant and tutor.

The shifts in style were significantly greater for the e-course Experimental Group when compared with the Control Group, and this supports the view of learning arising from interactions and the dynamic nature of the interplay between tutors, learners, and peers. However, the group did not simply accept that all features of the system were equally useful, with a large number believing that the online communication with peers was no better than communicating with tutors and native speakers (Q.5: 67%). The interactive nature of the assessment within the e-course, an approach that Lee (2006) has shown to produce benefits in the form of more complex writing, may also have contributed to the performance of the Experimental Group.

As educational technology matures, it will have the capacity to provide interactive environments that support the collaborative aspects of learning, leading Hyland (2006) to conclude that collaboration brings significant changes to the social dimension of learning, making writing classes more collaborative with students being more active by, for example, taking the initiative in discussions. This social dimension of constructivist learning was rated highly by the e-course students, with a majority stating that they would like more frequent online communication with native English speakers (Q.7: 60%), although 20% identified the native speakers' lack of pedagogic skills as being a disadvantage.

The e-course made student writing more widely available to an audience of peers and created a greater awareness of audience and communicative purpose. Warschauer (2002) and Greenfield (2003) indicate that this motivates less proficient students and provides a non-threatening environment for students to practice their literacy skills and receive peer feedback on their work. There is evidence from Fitze (2006) that the electronic environment encourages participation from students who do not interact in face-to-face situations. This may have contributed to the impact of the computer-based learning environment in this study because a majority of the students found the online communication with tutors to be less intimidating than going to the tutor's office (Q.6: 57%).

This experiment shows the benefits of helping students become competent cross-cultural communicators by providing an autonomous learning environment that has been shown to significantly change the rhetorical style of students, when compared with a conventional course. Within the e-course, students were provided with opportunities to explore and construct their knowledge base, taking a more active role in acquiring the target language, as elucidated by Hawisher and Selfe (2006) when they considered globalization and cyberspace. They no longer relied solely on their textbooks and saw the benefits of a cost-effective system for distributing materials, such as the model essays by native speakers (Q.4: 73%), and even complained that there were insufficient materials (Q.3: 83%). This is an encouraging response because it indicates that the materials provided were in demand.

Generally, from the open-ended questions, the perception of the e-course was that:

- Overall, the e-course was seen as robust and constructive.
- Contrastive features were helpful in understanding cultural differences.
- The resources on the e-course were helpful, though not sufficient, and more English resources were needed to establish an EFL autonomous learning environment.

More online communication would facilitate knowledge construction and cross-cultural exploration.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although the findings of this study may be applicable to other higher education institutions that are considering applying Web-based teaching and research in ESL, there are limitations. The e-course was designed specifically for Chinese PhD students in the Natural Sciences who had studied English for a number of years, and the findings for other groups of students may vary according to their cultural heritage and their proficiency in the target language. New courses, especially those involving novel technological approaches, may be susceptible to novelty effects that exaggerate the benefits. A more pressing concern, and one that requires further investigation, is the relative impact of the various

components of the e-course. For example, is there a synergism between the components that produce the beneficial effects, or are some aspects less important than others, as suggested by student responses to the questionnaire?

CONCLUSION

This study explored the learning of English academic writing via an e-course in addition to conventional classroom instruction. It was designed to investigate the potential impact of educational technology on language learning and to explore the possibility of creating an interactive learning environment via online communication to raise overseas students' awareness of cross-cultural contrastive rhetoric. The data analysis demonstrated that there was a measurable difference in the rhetorical styles used by Chinese and UK writers, and that the Study Group of sixty PhD students majoring in natural sciences at the Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT), China was distinguishable from both UK and Chinese writers on four of the five measures used. The conventional training course brought about significant changes in the participants' style of writing in two of the four measures for which change was anticipated. However, the provision of the e-course increased the magnitude of this change, and extended it from two to three of the four measures. Although problems with the e-course were identified (e.g., insufficient materials and limited opportunities for online communication with native English speakers), the course was well received by a majority of students, with many expressing the wish to have more frequent and more personalised exchanges with native English speakers online.

APPENDIX: Sample Essay Data (Pre- and Post-Training)

What do you think of the English courses in the universities? (draft, Student E1)

Para1
Language is REGARDED AS A TOOL to be used everyday and English is taken as AN AXIOM that should be piled up in the daily life. It opens another window for us to see the outside world. It helps us understand better how people live in the western world where English is spoken as MOTHER TONGUE. ***Therefore,*** **English courses in the universities are necessary.**

Para2
Because of its importance, we start to learn English from grade school, ***then*** junior school ***and*** high school. It is no doubt someone may argue that we spend too much time on learning English ***due to*** the courses arranged by ministry of education. The motive of learning will stimulate the learning action. The basic components of learning motive are need of learning ***and*** expect of learning. Knowing what English learners' need is very important. There is a survey by South Medical University about the needs of English learning for the students. They sends out 300 inquiry papers, 243 returned, 66% of the correspondents say they had passed the CET6, ***and*** 6.1% of the correspondents attended TOL, EPT, WSK etc. This indicates that the students have a high level English background. Most university students say they strongly or highly need the professional English speaking and writing ability. Many say that they need the professional oral English, skills of translation ***and*** being familiar with the western culture. The aims of the English learners are very practical: they are mainly about motive of communication, they are eager to get the ability of oral English and writing English.

Para3
Teachers at the university continuously explain the grammar points and vocabulary details ***and*** students revise these points to gain high marks for examinations. We do not feel learning new knowledge, ***nor*** use the language in real-life situations. There are gaps between ideality and reality. There are still other

purposes for us to choose learning English, we could make a lot of friends from different areas. This is *also* important, *for* we could exchange research methods *and* expand our views about the world, I do think it's necessary for students of science knowing some other areas *such as* society, humanity.

Para4
We need two types of English courses: speaking lessons and writing lessons. Teachers in both lessons should encourage students to make a presentation about our study, which is fun for us all. We can sit down together *and* listen to others what work they are recently doing. For presenters they collect datum from us *and* try to make the presentations perfect, this disciplines their skills of making presentation *and* teachers give help on this, too. *If* English courses do not provide what we need, I think we do not have to have English courses.

Codes:
Theme/thesis statement: in the first paragraph
Topic sentence: topic change in paragraph 2
Metaphor (SMALL CAPS): 3
Discourse markers (***bold italics***): 18
Number of paragraphs: 4

What do you think of the English courses in the universities? (final version after the e-course, Student E1)

Para1
University students do not have to take English courses unless the courses provide them with what they need. They have already taken A LONG JOURNEY of studying English from kindergarten, to junior school, *then* to high school *and* the LONG MARCH extends to university. There is no doubt that they have spent too much time on learning the language, including its structure and vocabulary. It is time for them to use it *and* to put what they have learnt into practice.

Para2
Motivation is the key for individual's learning, *as* is indicated by a survey from South Medical University. A questionnaire on the needs of English learning for the tertiary students was sent out to 300 students and 243 returned. 66% of the responses expressed that they had passed the highest national English test CET6 *and* 6.1% passed international English tests *such as* TOL, EPT, WSK. The result reveals that the university students have already had a very strong English background. The open questions of the questionnaire *also* show that most students expressed their strongly desire to use the language *such as* in presentation, in translation *and* in cultural exchange. The aim of the English learners are very practical: real-life communication in both oral *and* written form.

Para3
Apparently, there is discrepancy between expectation and reality: university English courses are still about grammar points, vocabulary details, ***and therefore*** students do not feel learning anything new. The lack of oral and writing in English courses remains a problem in the curriculum *and* no wonder many students prefer not to go to English courses, *but* surfing on the internet reading authentic English materials instead.

Para4
It will be beneficial for the students *if* the university can arrange two types of English courses: one is oral English in class where students are encouraged to express themselves in English. The presenters can collect ideas from other students *and* improve their presentation skills. It will *also* be good fun for all the students no matter which discipline they are from, *for* they can sit down *and* share with what work they are currently doing, *which* expands their view of the world. The other is writing course after class.

Students can do research on a certain topic *and* give their opinion to the e-forum. As other students are from different areas, they might see it from other angles *and* comment *or* add in new ideas. The teacher can guide them to use the appropriate expressions and structures to express their ideas. Students can *then* be confident to use the English is real-life situations.

Codes:
Theme/thesis statement: in the first paragraph
Topic sentence: one in each paragraph
Metaphor (SMALL CAPS): 2
Discourse markers (***bold italics***): 26
Number of paragraphs: 4

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