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‘Enjoyable’, ‘okay’, or ‘like drawing teeth’? Chinese and British Students’ Views on Writing Assignments in UK Universities

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Abstract

Research in academic writing is a growing field within Applied Linguistics, yielding a wide range of conferences, journal publications and books. However, comparatively little work has been conducted on students’ *attitudes* towards the production of writing for assessment. This article reports findings from a questionnaire study of Chinese and British students ($n=202$) across 37 UK universities. The study aims to uncover the extent to which students feel they were prepared for tertiary-level writing, how useful they find assignment-writing, and whether they enjoy this activity. The focus of the article is on the similarities and differences in attitudes towards assessed writing given by the two student groups. Chinese students were selected as a contrast to British students as the former are now the largest overseas student group in the UK with more than 90,000 Chinese people studying in UK Higher Education (HE) in 2011-12 (UKCISA 2013). Detailed, open-ended responses from the questionnaire were coded and followed up with email and face-to-face interview questions with a subset of students ($n=55$). The findings indicate that neither student group feel well-prepared for the challenges of tertiary-level writing, and reveal a depth of feeling regarding the enjoyment and perceived utility—or otherwise—of academic writing.

Introduction

Academic writing is a ‘high stakes’ activity (Lillis and Scott 2008: 9), with academic success in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) resting on the ability to write well (e.g. Douglas 2010, Hewings 1999, Leki and Carson 1994, Lillis and Scott 2008, Nation 2008, North 2005). For undergraduate and taught Masters courses, ‘academic writing’ primarily comprises written assignments which are assessed by discipline lecturers. At PhD level, while students are not writing assignments, they are still engaged in writing for the purposes of assessment and produced for a particular, known audience (supervisors, and ultimately examiners).

Research in academic literacies has described how students at university struggle to unravel assignment rubrics, to match their understanding of a particular genre with that of their lecturer, and to comprehend exactly what constitutes ‘good writing’ within a particular discipline (e.g. Crème and Lea 2003, Lea 2004, Lea and Stierer 2000, Lea and Street 1998, Lillis 1997, Lillis and Turner 2001). As well as the long-standing challenge of working out the ‘rules of the academic achievement game’ (Newman 2001: 470), students are faced with more current challenges. Flexible, inter-disciplinary courses at undergraduate and Masters level mean that students must rapidly develop an awareness of writing within different disciplines and of a range of different lecturers’ requirements. An additional, ongoing challenge in UK HE is the ‘unprecedented amount of innovation in assessment’ (Gibbs 2006: 20) giving rise to an array of innovative assignment genres (Ganobcsik-Williams 2004, Leedham 2009, Nesi and Gardner 2006).

Difficulties in the transition from school to university are well-documented (e.g. Hardy and Clughen 2012, Krause 2001). In their report of their questionnaire and focus group study into UK university students' views towards writing, Hardy and Clughen (2012) conclude that 'the majority of students were not prepared for the type of literacies they would encounter at university' (33) and had difficulties in writing in an 'academic way' (49). Similarly, Krause (2001) emphasizes the need for greater support at the start of undergraduate study as students make the transition from school.

While research in academic writing is a rapidly-expanding field of enquiry, comparatively little work has been conducted on students' *attitudes* towards the production of writing for assessment during their university studies. This article reports findings from a questionnaire study of two groups of students in UK Higher Education, with the aim of uncovering the extent to which students feel they were prepared for tertiary-level writing, how useful they find assignment-writing, and whether they enjoy this activity. The focus of the article is on the similarities and differences in attitudes towards assessed writing given by Chinese and British students ($n=202$) across 37 UK universities.

Chinese students were selected as a contrast to British students as the former are now the largest overseas student group in the UK with more than 90,000 Chinese people studying in UK HE in 2011-12 (UKCISA, 2013). For L1¹ (first language) Chinese students who are studying in British universities, there are added difficulties, not least due to the fact that they may have had little experience of extended writing in English before their UK study. Chinese universities employ more traditional assignments such as essays and reports, and are likely to assess students using 'fact-oriented exams' (Tian 2008: 146), thus rendering students less accustomed to extended writing and to innovative assignment types (Cross and Hitchcock 2007, Nield 2004). For example, Kinzley (2011: 202-3) interviewed ten PRC (People's Republic of China) students studying in the UK about their secondary school writing experiences in both Chinese and English classes, finding that they had little experience of extended writing in either language: their experience of writing in Chinese and in English was largely confined to single paragraphs, short answer questions and short essays. The longest piece of writing prior to UK study reported by his cohort was a 600-word essay in Chinese. However, while Chinese students clearly face considerable challenges in adapting to UK study, it can also be argued that L1 English and L2 English students have similar developmental paths since both have to learn how to write in an acceptable academic way as 'the native academic writer does not seem to exist' (Römer 2009).

The questionnaire reported on here was conducted as part of a larger project on Chinese students' writing in English in UK universities (Leedham 2014).² While the main project focused on a corpus linguistic analysis of Chinese and British students' written assignments, the questionnaire (entitled 'Writing Assignments at University in the UK') together with follow-on emails and interviews were motivated by my desire to understand students' experiences of and attitudes towards the writing they were required to undertake within their university studies.

The next section describes the methods used to uncover students' attitudes and the data collected, and subsequent sections explore the findings.

¹ Throughout this article, 'L1 English' students are taken to mean students who self-report English as their first language and whose secondary education was wholly or mainly within the UK. Occasionally this student group are referred to as 'British' students'. Similarly, 'L1 Chinese' students with corresponding conditions of language and education are referred to as 'Chinese students'. 'L2 English students' refers to any students who use English as an additional language.

² This project began as a PhD study (Leedham 2011) and I am grateful to The Open University for a fully funded studentship and to my supervisors for their constant support (Ann Hewings, Barbara Mayor and Sarah North).

Methods and Data

The questionnaire for this study features a mix of the factual (concerning demographic characteristics), the behavioural (concerning students' writing methods), and the attitudinal (seeking students' views) (after Sheridan-Rabideau, McLaughlin, and Novak 2002). This article focuses on students' responses to the last category, while taking account of the demographic range, and explores students' perceptions as to how they learned academic writing, and their feelings towards this. The questionnaire was hosted on the SurveyMonkey website with text boxes provided for open-ended answers. Codes were assigned twice to the responses, with a year interval in between, to ensure greater intra-rater reliability.³

Following approval from the Open University Ethics Committee, a link to the survey was sent to personal contacts from a range of UK universities, and posted to websites such as the Chinese Students and Scholars Association. Additionally, adverts were placed on the social networking site Facebook in order to reach a wider range of L1 Chinese and British students at under- and postgraduate level in UK universities. The survey link was also sent to all L1 Chinese and a sample of L1 English participants in the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus project (a collection of undergraduate and Masters students' assignments, see Gardner and Nesi 2012). The accompanying email and the preface to the questionnaire stated that the survey sought students whose L1 was Chinese and who had been primarily educated in a Chinese-speaking country prior to tertiary education, or whose L1 was English and were primarily UK-educated.

In total, 202 responses were collected over a 16-month period from L1 Chinese and L1 English students in a wide range of disciplines and from 37 UK universities. Over two-thirds of respondents answered all 23 questions (in the findings, the raw number of participants is given for each question discussed). Of the 202 respondents, 75 listed L1 Chinese as their first language (51 Mandarin, 18 Cantonese and 6 from Wu/Gan Hakka or Minnan dialects) and 127 respondents gave English as their L1. The L1 Chinese students were mainly from the east coast cities of the PRC with a further 10 beyond mainland China (Hong Kong [5], Malaysia [3] and Taiwan [2]); these demographics are similar to the overall provenance of L1 Chinese students in UK universities (UKCISA 2013).

Respondents represent all levels of study from Foundation; undergraduate (years 1, 2, and 3); Masters; and PhD; with significantly more L1 Chinese students than British on Masters level courses, and slightly fewer at undergraduate and PhD levels. The postgraduate students were able to reflect on their previous study at undergraduate and Masters level, and many of these respondents gave insightful comments on how their views towards writing had changed over their academic careers. Levels of study are discussed where views are skewed towards undergraduate or postgraduate and are given for all longer quotations from open-ended questions. For both cohorts, approximately 67% of respondents are female; the L1 Chinese students are mainly aged 20 – 29, while British respondents are spread across a wider age range. The low proportion of L1 Chinese students under the age of 20 is probably due to the higher number of L1 Chinese Masters students; additionally the narrower age range for the L1 Chinese students may also reflect government policies on the age of students who will be funded for overseas education.

Follow-up emails were sent to those students who had indicated they were willing to be contacted further ($n=121$); these had a relatively high response rate of 55 participants (20 L1 Chinese and 35 L1 English). This subset of the main group is similar in the proportions of undergraduates and postgraduates responding. Some of these responses were followed up for a third round of clarification by either email (11) or interview (6). Participants were selected on the basis of their willingness to be contacted further, and on any ambiguity in their questionnaire or second round responses.

³ See McAndrews (2009) for a discussion on using online surveys.

Findings and Discussion

This section is subdivided into responses to questions asking first, about the teaching students have received on academic writing, and second, how they feel about academic writing currently (e.g. whether they find it useful, enjoyable, etc.). While the study asked students broadly about their experience of academic writing, all respondents concentrated on their experience of writing for assessment. Responses from each student group are grouped separately with subheadings drawn from themes from the answers. Under- and postgraduate student responses are considered together as the latter provide comments on academic writing throughout the whole of their student career.

Learning to write: British students

The survey question 'Where and how were you taught about academic writing?' was followed by the explanatory text: 'By this, I mean the kind of assignment writing you do at University, e.g. At Secondary school/In a pre-sessional in the UK/We used a textbook/the teacher gave us tips'. A variety of sources of information were mentioned by the L1 English students ($n=106$), including previous teachers, current teachers, family and friends, online resources and print dictionaries.

Vague or minimal teaching of academic writing

Although the majority of L1 English students (90% of respondents) said that they had received teaching on academic writing, the open comments reveal that many regarded this teaching as vague or minimal:

When doing 'A' level English the teacher said something about listing a few points and making them into paragraphs but that was all. (Year 3 Philosophy)⁴

Sometimes the only tuition was the provision of handouts:

I have reams of notes which were virtually thrown at us to learn in our own time. (Year 3 Electrical and Electronic Engineering)

One student, commenting on the lack of help during her degree course, contrasted this dearth of academic writing instruction with the importance placed on IT skills:

I'm surprised how little help we get with writing our assignments at university, especially considering the fact that we had a whole module in a semester on how to use a PC. (Year 2 Business Studies)

Several students reported that they learned how to write at secondary level through taking an A-level in an essay-writing subject such as History, English or Economics. While these students clearly benefited from learning how to write in these more discursive subjects, the transition to university would still necessitate learning disciplinary-specific writing.

Around 10%⁵ of the L1 English students claimed to have *never* received explicit instruction on academic writing in their educational careers to date:

I think I pretty much just picked it up as I went along. (Year 1 French)

Additionally, several postgraduate students claimed they had only learned how to write during their current programme of study:

I feel I didn't really get any insights into academic writing until I started at Masters level. (PhD in E-learning)

A few students commented, sometimes dramatically, on how a lack of instruction in academic writing had affected their academic careers:

⁴ Minor spelling errors have been corrected in quotations from student data.

⁵ The percentage here and elsewhere is given as an approximation, as it involves an interpretation of student responses.

I have never been taught about essay writing. At GCSE I did very little and I deliberately chose A levels that didn't involve essays (Art and Geography). (Year 3 Adult Nursing)

I've always been very bad essay writer and it's contributed to the spectacular failure of my academic career. (Year 3 Philosophy)

Learning through 'trial and error'

Related to this perceived lack of tuition, is the description by individuals of the 'trial and error' approach adopted in learning how to write in an appropriate style:

I have never been taught how to write academically, I'm slowly learning during the Masters course, learning through the mistakes I make. (MSc in Maths Education)

The resigned comment of one student sums up the feelings of many regarding the teaching they receive on how to write:

I still don't even know if I am doing it right but as I have passed so far I guess it's ok. (Year 3 Adult Nursing)

Learning to write: Chinese students

Forty six L1 Chinese students responded to the question: 'Where and how were you taught about academic writing?' with pre-sessional or foundation courses at UK universities given as the major source of teaching about writing (cited by 10 of the responding L1 Chinese students [22%]), and secondary or sixth form teaching cited by 9 students (20% of respondents). Several L1 Chinese students commented that they had not been taught how to write in an academic style until they came to the UK. However, it may be the case that L1 Chinese students are basing their answer on sources of information on academic writing in L1 English, and excluding any transference of guidance on academic writing from their previous education in Chinese.

Vague or minimal teaching of academic writing

While the majority of Chinese students (approximately 42 students or 90%) claimed to have been taught how to write, whether in the UK or China, the open comments show the same pattern as for the L1 English students in revealing that many regarded this teaching as vague or minimal:

I was never seriously taught about academic writing. The teacher in foundation course only gave me the tips in writing in IELTS. (Masters in Film and Theatre)

A few Chinese students said they had not been explicitly taught how to write academically and had taught themselves, often following enrollment in a postgraduate course:

Was never actual 'taught' about the academic writing, but learned along the way when needed. (PhD student, Management Science)

I think for me I only learn it after I started my PhD study, from reading papers and getting corrections from my supervisor. (PhD in Computer Science)

Learning through 'trial and error'

Again, similarly to the British group, many Chinese students described a haphazard approach to learning:

Follow textbook guidance, self-practice, through trial and error and reading examples of academic writing. (Year 2 in Interdisciplinary Studies)

The question on preparation for tertiary study was followed by a question on students' attitudes towards academic writing.

Attitudes toward writing: British students

The explanatory text for the question 'How do you feel about assignment-writing at the moment?' encouraged students to give detailed responses: 'e.g. do you enjoy it/feel it's useful? Has your attitude changed over your time at University? If so, in what way?'

Ninety-six L1 English students answered this question, of whom 56 were undergraduates and 40 postgraduates (8 Masters and 32 PhD). Of the respondents who expressed a like or dislike, 39 explicitly stated that they enjoyed writing assignments and 23 said that they did not enjoy this activity; these proportions were the same across undergraduate and postgraduate students.

A love or hate relationship

The L1 English students often expressed strong feelings of either 'love' or 'hate' towards assignment-writing. Those who enjoyed academic writing described the task as 'incredibly beneficial', giving 'a sense of satisfaction' and finding it 'useful for consolidating [...] thoughts'. However, even within this group, several described feelings of angst over deadlines and mentioned their tendency to procrastinate with the following a typical comment:

I get very, very stressed because it takes me so long and I am not confident but once it's done and I look back on it I have enjoyed them and learned a lot. (Year 3, Adult Nursing)

Students expressing a dislike of writing ($n=23$) were equally candid, describing writing as 'stressful', 'pointless', 'time consuming and boring':

I hate it! I struggle to put the ideas together, which is why my plans eventually get given up. (Year 3, Hospitality, Leisure and Tourism Management)

Time in writing assignments was a feature for many students, with several commenting that they feel that they 'spend more time on it' than they 'should'.

Misunderstanding the assessment rubric

Several British students commented on occasions when they had failed to follow the assessment instructions. Follow-up questions revealed that misunderstandings were frequently due to students' misinterpreting the rubrics, not realizing they had to provide sufficient supporting evidence, giving 'the wrong kinds of information' or failing to show an adequate level of criticality. A few students looked externally, blaming their lack of success on 'ambiguous' question rubrics.

PhD students' reflections on their student careers

Several L1 English PhD students also expressed very negative views on academic writing despite choosing to spend an additional three or more years researching and writing on their chosen area. Many gave lengthy responses, in which they reflected on their university careers:

I find writing painful, stressful, like drawing teeth [...] I don't think it gets easier—but more and more difficult. (PhD in Sociology)

One commented dramatically on her current writing as:

akin to suffering from bi-polar disorder. There are times when the writing isn't flowing and I feel depressed and worthless. When I complete something I am happy with I feel elated. (PhD in Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics)

For another, writing is viewed as 'always a challenge [...] when it's going well, time passes while I am unaware. When I am struggling, it is the hardest task in the world' (PhD in Applied Linguistics).

One PhD student also commented insightfully on the difficulty in developing 'a suitable academic style' when writing in a cross-disciplinary field, saying that 'social sciences require a

discursive writing style, whereas technology requires a more precise and detailed technical style' (PhD in Sustainable Transport). Another commented on knowingly deciding to produce different work to that required in the assignment as he or she was 'willing to take the hit of being marked down accordingly to do work which I wanted to do' (PhD in Educational Technology). Such shrewd awareness of assessment requirements, overridden by a desire to fulfill their own writing agenda, is unusual, with far more students struggling to understand what the rubric was asking them to do.

Working across disciplines

Follow-up questions of British undergraduates taking combined honours degrees suggests an early awareness of different writing styles. An English and Sociology student commented that in the former she tried to use 'more sophisticated' vocabulary whereas in the latter she is 'more straightforward'. A Sociology and Anthropology student felt that her Sociology essays were 'more colloquial' and that she had 'absorbed some of the "style" appropriate to the discipline'. Writing for one History student was described as 'completely fact-based' while the same student writing in English Literature felt there was 'more room to express ideas and theories'.

Attitudes toward writing: Chinese students

The 51 L1 Chinese respondents to the question 'How do you feel about assignment-writing at the moment?' were split fairly evenly between undergraduates (27) and postgraduates (24, with 14 Masters and 10 PhD students) and are similar to the split among the overall L1 Chinese student group. Of those students who expressed their like or dislike of academic writing, 14 specifically stated that they enjoyed writing assignments and 9 that they did not enjoy this task. The open-ended responses revealed a degree of qualified enjoyment, with a focus on the utility of writing and the difficulties of adapting to a western style.

Qualified 'enjoyment'

Many students gave a rather qualified response of their 'enjoyment' of assignment-writing:

At the moment, don't hate it too much. If it's on a topic of interest, do enjoy doing it.
(Undergraduate (year not given) Civil Engineering)

Yes. I change from abomination to custom. (Year 2, Project and Programme Management)

Although claiming to enjoy the writing, many also said they found the task 'challenging', 'tiring' or 'hard':

I feel that doing assignments is very tiring, but once finished, I have a sense of confidence. (Year 1 in Knowledge Management)

In the beginning it was a bit painful—you never know the correct word/expression! Now it is more like a tool for me to express myself, so I started having fun with it.
(PhD in Computer Science)

Of the group who professed a dislike of writing, reasons included the stress of deadlines and struggles with language:

I don't really like it [...] maybe it's because I'm so bad at writing, so I don't write often and don't want to show it to others. (Masters in Educational Technology)

Usefulness of assessment

Most Chinese students, whether expressing enjoyment of writing or not, appeared to find assignments beneficial with, in total, 25 L1 Chinese respondents mentioning the word 'useful' in relation to assignments, and none stating otherwise. Some commented that assignments were helpful in improving their English, others that they helped to consolidate knowledge, or were of benefit for their future career. Writing was seen as 'a tough process', 'useful but hard', and necessary to improve their language level and to progress in education and a future career.

Difficulty of writing in English

Several L1 Chinese students commented on the difficulty of writing in English as this is 'just a different way of thinking' (PhD in Computer Science) and 'there are certain expressions people from Chinese culture background would understand without explaining' (PhD in Language and Education). British students were viewed as writing in a more 'direct and clear' way, whereas Chinese students are 'taught to be modest' and find it difficult to give their opinion (Year 1, Film and Theatre). The general view of writing in English is that it is 'a hard nut' for most Chinese students (Masters in Statistics).

A common strategy described in writing assignments is to 'form ideas or meanings in Chinese and then try to translate them into English'. Most students move away from this at postgraduate level:

I had been used to write in L1 Chinese firstly and then translat(ing) it. But afterward I switch to writing and planning at the same time. (PhD in Aviation)

Conclusion and Implications

This article has considered individual Chinese and British students' views of academic writing, exploring their perceptions of how well prepared they were for tertiary-level writing and their current feelings towards writing. The inclusion of postgraduates has shown how students reflect on their academic careers and illustrates that even at an advanced level of study, both British and Chinese students studying in Britain often feel inadequately prepared. There does not seem to be a smooth path from undergraduate to postgraduate study. Instead academic student writing is characterised by struggle and deadlines throughout.

The survey and follow-up questions remain a tentative exploration of attitudes to academic writing, but have revealed some interesting areas of similarity and difference between the two student groups. Overall, the L1 Chinese and L1 English students expressed enjoyment or lack of enjoyment of assignment-writing in approximately the same proportions (5:3 like: dislike) with no discernible difference between under- and postgraduate levels. A striking difference is in the L1 English students' strongly-expressed views in response to the open-ended questions, particularly for those who disliked writing. In contrast to the L1 Chinese students, the L1 English respondents seemed to focus less on the utility or otherwise of assignments, concentrating their responses on the strength of their feelings towards writing. It is, however, difficult to tell from a questionnaire whether one student group really feels differently to another, or whether it is simply more acceptable for the L1 English group to express stronger feelings. What seems clear from the answers provided is that both student groups find academic writing hard and neither group feel well-prepared to undertake this.

The fact that both groups experienced difficulties in acquiring the skills needed to write in an appropriate academic style suggests that writing support in the form of one-to-one tutoring or writing classes for *all* students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels would be beneficial. Chinese students are aware of the different style of Western writing and would welcome more support in understanding lecturer expectations. Despite the benefit of a background in the UK education system, British students similarly feel unsure as to lecturers' requirements, with proportionally more comments on issues of misunderstanding assignment rubric. British students would thus also benefit from awareness-raising sessions to explore assessment rubrics, genre expectations, and differences in writing across disciplines. The study thus effectively reinforces the findings of Krause (2001) and Hardy and Clughen (2012) in that both L1 and L2 English student groups feel under-prepared and unsure as to how to write at tertiary level, and has implications for the teaching of writing at secondary school in the UK as well as the preparation for L2 English students on foundation courses. It should be noted that the students responding to the questionnaire are those who have overcome a perceived lack of instruction in academic writing and who have succeeded in this system since they are currently studying for an undergraduate or higher degree at university.

A strength of this study is the diversity of students surveyed in terms of the range of courses, levels and universities. These features, however, could also be viewed as limitations as the wide variety of experience means it is unclear how far the differing views are due to any one factor, with the linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds of the L1 English and L1 Chinese students being just one variable. Future research in this area could isolate some of these variables and include interviews with students in a single discipline, level and L1 group. More in-depth interviews with students, discipline lecturers and writing tutors would also be useful in uncovering attitudes towards academic writing from each group.

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