

Challenges for College-Level Learners of Academic English Writing in China

Xuan Jiang

Florida International University, USA

Abstract: English learners in Chinese universities feel it is difficult to write academically. The difficulty lies in but not limited to linguistic differences; it also stems from other factors including cultural origins, educational values, rhetorical strategies, and reader awareness. Recommendations towards overcoming these barriers are put forward in this paper.

Differences between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) may generate transfer hindrances and challenges for English as a foreign language (EFL) students. These challenges in L2 learning or narrowed down to L2 academic writing are rooted not only in a linguistic arena, but also deeply and essentially in the differences in philosophies, values, rhetorical strategies as well as reader awareness derived from cultures. Many theories and research studies, particularly Chinese-specific ones, have paved the way for seeking effective approaches to identifying and overcoming these difficulties and thus improving writing competency for Chinese EFL writers.

This essay will firstly elicit the academic writing (Swales, 1990) and the L2 writing process (Silva, 1997). It will then review the literature which elaborates on the differences between Chinese and English academic writing in tertiary education from various perspectives. Finally, some recommendations will be made in order to inform and inspire both English teachers and EFL learners' questing for improvement of tertiary academic writing in China.

Academic Writing in L2

Academic writing for EFL learners is difficult because of its multi-faceted nature. Swales (1990) defines academic writing as a socio-rhetorical community of both writers and readers functioning in communicating goals, conventions, and socialization processes on the basis of genre analysis. This definition embraces sociocultural and rhetorical aspects, together with communicative goals (i.e., building writer-reader relationships as well as genres), all of which will be discussed later in this paper. Swales's definition does not specify academic writing in L1 or L2, while Silva (1997) moves into L2 writing by explaining that the L2 writing process includes strategic, rhetorical, and linguistic differences from the L1 writing process. Silva's explanation echoes Swales' and contributes the strategic factor to the existing multiple differences. Cumming (2001) furthermore restates that complexity and variability in academic writing and L2 learning constitute great barriers for L2 writers in obtaining overall competency. Cumming's statement is integrative but does not mention what attributes contribute to complexity and variability.

Challenges for Chinese EFL Writers

The barriers mentioned above are true of Chinese EFL writers in tertiary academic writing. This paper will analyse the elements causing barriers and challenges in L2 academic writing for Chinese EFL learners from four perspectives: cultural origins, educational values, rhetorical strategies, and reader awareness.

Cultural Origins

Culture differences mainly originate from distinctions of western and Chinese

Jiang, X. (2011). Challenges for college-level learners of academic English writing in China. In M. S. Plakhotnik, S. M. Nielsen, & D. M. Pane (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual College of Education & GSN Research Conference* (pp. 95-100). Miami: Florida International University.
http://coeweb.fiu.edu/research_conference/

philosophies. The two representative philosophies are those of Socrates and Confucius. Socrates focused on “truth and universal definitions” (Scollon, 1999, p. 17) and sought for the outcomes of a hypothesis, whereas Confucius was more interested in action.

The conceptions in the two philosophies have led to variability in teacher-centred or learner-centred class mode, ways of thinking, teachers’ and students’ roles and objectives of education (Scollon, 1999). They have also shaped the behaviours of teachers and students and the complicated notions linked to communicative interactions between students and their teachers in respective cultures. The Socratic approach to education underlies many daily activities in the Western classroom and highlights “rhetoric as a search for knowledge and education” (Scollon, 1999, p. 17). This approach is dramatically different from the Confucian philosophy because Confucius places rhetorical reasoning as secondary but gaining wisdom and complying with morality in the first place. Here morality refers only to the moral code that teacher uses to communicate with students. The Confucian philosophy also attaches great importance to “group identity and harmony maintenance” (Scollon, 1999, p. 10), which may seem to be a predominant target for Chinese students. Under the influence of the Confucian education philosophy, what teachers say is authoritative and true and these truths should be repeated and remembered instead of being questioned by learners. “Docility, passivity, and conformity” (Yen, 1987, p. 52) are what education demanded of its students in this Confucian heritage culture.

Scollon (1999) undertook a case study to identify the cultural constructs that underlie the viewpoints on the purposes of education in Chinese and Western classrooms and that influence the behaviors of students and teachers. She observed that the cultural notions stemming from the philosophies of Socrates and Confucius tacitly affect the learning processes. Brown (2007) supported the same viewpoint by claiming that L2 learning is “second culture learning” to some degree (p. 188). Therefore, Chinese EFL learners under the influence of historically dominant Confucian view tend to fail to make a hypothesis and then verify or falsify it to search for knowledge by using rhetoric reasoning.

Educational Values

Seen from the current model of English education in Chinese universities, education values vary considerably between Chinese and Western pedagogies, which cause another challenge for EFL learners in academic writing. Under the impact of the Confucian philosophy in China, books are considered as an integral of “knowledge, wisdom and truth” (Maley, 1990, p. 97). This view results in the “teacher-centered textbook-analysis-based Grammar-Translation Method” of English teaching in China for years (Yang, 2000, p. 19). As to English teaching in higher education, English curriculum in all colleges and universities in China works under the authority of a nationally unified syllabus and the College English Test (CET) examination system (Wang, 1998).

The CET is a national English standardized test for all non-English majors in four-year-degree universities. Its aim is to test whether students have fulfilled the requirements of the national syllabus. In reality, many colleges and universities have made passing CET as their top priority. In this situation, students’ diverse needs for English are hardly noticed; teachers pay much attention to teaching “language knowledge and test-taking skills” (Wang, 1998, p. 29), rather than language skills necessary for communication or English competency. As to English writing, it is not for students to generate ideas and express themselves, but to give students another chance to show what they have learned in class, especially grammar (Silva et al., 2003). English writing is still taught in the traditional way, emphasizing and correcting grammatical

mistakes instead of helping the students generate thoughts (Wang, 1998). Communicative approaches such as genre-based approaches are severely constrained by simulation tests and many test-preparation exercises for the CET.

However, despite the demanding preparation and skill-specific training, the level of university students' English writing in CET has remained low because the students lack effective means to generate and organize their own ideas. They may produce texts of nearly grammatical perfection and appropriate vocabulary use, but the texts are still shallow in content and obscure in meaning (Mu, 2007).

Contrary to this traditional view of education, the Socratic approach results in many daily peer activities such as group work and pair work as well as teacher-student interactions in the Western classroom. It emphasizes "rhetoric as a search of knowledge and education" (Scollon, 1999, p. 17). Writing is not only about a correct word form and appropriate vocabulary, but "rational argumentation, objectivity in the writer's position and views, and factuality in justification and proof" (Hinkel, 1999, p. 107). These differences between Chinese and Western education values produce a gap in requirements, goals, and emphasis of academic writing.

Rhetorical Strategies

Closely linked to the educational value and pedagogical approaches are rhetoric strategies, which will be discussed here with the aid of contrastive rhetoric studies (Kaplan, 1966). The differences between rhetoric strategies in English and Chinese may also create problems for Chinese EFL writers. Contrastive rhetoric studies which were initiated by Kaplan show differences in paragraph and text organization varying from different language and cultures. The Cultural Thought Patterns (Kaplan, 2001, p. 21) show five types of paragraph development. For example, English academic writing is linear and explicit in paragraph organization while the Chinese style is rotating or wheeling (Mu, 2007). Mu contended that if Chinese writers employ or "transfer rhetorical conventions" in accordance with norms from Chinese linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the writing may turn out to be "out of focus" (p. 78).

Another point is the use of proverbs. This is often found in Chinese texts when authors feel that they need to strengthen their argument by adopting the presumed commonsense in proverbs, but the adoption of proverbs and sayings does not embody a rhetorical strategy accepted in English academic writing (Hinkel, 1999).

The last point is cohesion. Chinese students use fewer organizing devices, such as relative clauses, conjunctions, subordinate clauses, and other grammatical or lexical links, which are widely applied in English writing to express relations between ideas and make meaning clear and logical (Mu, 2007). As a result, native English speakers (NESs) have difficulty in identifying the main points of Chinese students' compositions because of the weak cohesion. The three points above represent only a fraction of the infinite differences of rhetorical strategies between Chinese and English writing, but they reveal major and typical aspects of challenges for EFL writers in China.

Reader Awareness

English and Chinese writers are also noted to be different in their writing process with regard to their relationship to their readers, which in turn can also create a challenge for Chinese EFL writers to write English essays. According to Okamura (2006), one of the difficulties for 13 Japanese scientists in writing was unawareness of how to use linguistic forms to accommodate particular readers. This corresponded with Gosden's (1996) study, in which the Japanese researchers failed to be aware of their readers while writing their first research article in English. The reason was that eastern cultures, including the Chinese culture, require the reader

responsibility while English academic writing derives from a writer-responsible culture (Hinds, 1987). Both findings above seem to support the Cultural Thought Patterns (Kaplan, 2001). The intention of native-English speaking writers is to make writing purpose explicit and give sufficient lexical and grammatical signals to facilitate the readers. They consistently keep their readers in mind. Conversely, Chinese writers use less “landmarks” in the writing, leave readers more space of association, and assume that the readers could code and decode their writing (Hinds, 1987). Hence, Chinese writings are made coherent by internal meanings of sentences rather than apparent conjunctions or other organization links (Mu, 2007). It is accordingly inferred that Chinese writers with a reader-responsible background will inevitably meet challenges to adapt themselves into a culture of writer-responsibility.

Recommendations

Because there are gaps between English and Chinese writing for EFL learners in China, how should the EFL writers bridge the gaps to at least lessen the difficulties in academic writing? Some recommendations that may be useful for the struggling writers include academic interaction with NESs, extensive exposure to English reading materials, explicit understanding of English writing conventions, and exposure to the English academic text.

Academic interaction with NESs is presumed to improve EFL learners’ academic language in a whole. This type of peer interaction facilitates English learners’ exposure to standard English and provides them with the practice and feedback required to develop sentence structure, language use, and essay organization (Scarcella, 2002). This type of interaction has solid theoretical ground called zone of proximal development (ZPD) put forward by Vygotsky (1978), an advocate of socio-cultural perspective of L2 learning. He believes that learning occurs when an individual interacts with an interlocutor within his or her ZPD, a situation in which a learner is capable of performing at a higher level because there is support from an interlocutor. EFL learners can reorganize and internalize their language knowledge during academic collaboration with NESs. For instance, Chinese EFL learners may grasp opportunities to attend academic conferences, submit to English journals, and read comments on those submissions and discuss them in academic forums.

Stotsky (1983) asserted that reading is more beneficial than grammar or extra writing practice in improving students’ writing. She further highlighted that “reading experience seems to be a consistent correlate of, or influence on, writing ability” (p. 637). Therefore, reading is inseparable from writing and EFL writers in China should be immersed in the English reading materials to improve both content and writing strategies. English learners are suggested to read academic essays in a certain genre, pinpoint their organization, find their rhetoric reasoning, and recognize cohesion symbols, all of which serve as preparation for their own writing in the same genre.

Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) confirmed that English proficiency can not exclusively explain Chinese EFL learners’ difficulties in English writing. Chinese writers need more explicit understanding of English writing conventions. Hence, EFL writers may search on the Internet or personally attend writing-strategy workshops or focused courses in order to manage how to write in accordance with English writing conventions.

According to Scarcella (2002), a clearly written English text provides essential input for writing development, particularly citations, references, coherence, and cohesion. Therefore, it is a dependable source of academic English input in light of Chinese EFL writers. English learners can benefit from the form, format, and organization of the English text. Besides, the clearly written text is supposed to establish a strong relationship between the author and readers through

its logical cohesion.

The four recommendations above attempt to guide EFL learners in academic writing from different but related aspects, scaffolded by relevant literature and research studies to empower learners with cognitive, social, and communicative strategies. Some of the studies quoted in this paper are Chinese-specific, so they are presumed to be generalizable and feasible in Chinese EFL context and helpful to Chinese EFL writers to overcome difficulties and improve their writing competency.

Conclusion

This paper described four differences between English and Chinese cultures that lead to writing challenges for EFL tertiary students. Accordingly, some recommendations to overcome the difficulties and challenges and improve their writing competency were made. The four recommendations aim at giving effective suggestions to EFL writers in the Chinese tertiary context. It is hoped that both differences revealed and recommendations made here can be beneficial in the Chinese EFL context and for both EFL teachers and learners.

References

- Bitchener, J., & Basturkmen, H. (2006). Issues for 12 students writing a thesis in English: Student and supervisor perceptions. *Proceedings of the annual meeting of the international communication association* Dresden International Congress Centre, Dresden, Germany: http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/9/0/0/7/p90077_index.html.
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5 Ed.). White Plains: Pearson Education.
- Cumming, A. (2001). Learning to write in a second language: Two decades of research. *International Journal of English Studies*, 2(1)1-23.
- Gosden, H. (1996). Verbal reports of Japanese novices' research writing practices in English. *Journal of second language writing*, 5(2), 109-128.
- Hinds, J. (1987). Reader versus writer responsibility: A new typology. In U. Connor & R. Kaplan (Eds.), *Writing across languages: Analysis of L2 text* (pp. 141-152). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Hinkel, E. (1999). Objectivity and credibility in L1 and L2 academic writing. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Culture in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 90-108). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaplan, R. (2001). Cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education. In T. Silva & P. K. Matsuda (Eds.), *Landmark essays on ESL writing* (pp. 11-25). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Maley, A. (1990). 'Xanada—a miracle of rare device': the teaching of English in china. In Y. F. Dzau (Ed.), *English in China* (pp. 95-105). Hong Kong: API Press.
- Mu, C. (2007). *Second language writing strategies*. Teneriffe Qld: Post Pressed.
- Okamura, A. (2006). Two types of strategies used by Japanese scientists, when writing research articles in English. *System*, 34, 68-79.
- Scarcella, R. (2002). Some key factors affecting English learners' development of advanced literacy. In M. J. Schleppegrell & M. C. Colombi (Eds.), *Developing advanced literacy in first and second language* (pp. 209-226). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Scollon, S. (1999). Not to waste words or students: Confucian and Socratic discourse in the tertiary classroom. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Culture in second language teaching and learning*

- (pp. 13-27). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Silva, T. (1997). On the ethical treatment of ESL writers. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(2), 359-363.
- Silva, T., Reichelt, M., Chikuma, Y., Duval-Couetil, N., Mo, R.-P. J., & Velez-Rendon, G. (2003). Second language writing up close and personal: Some success stories. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Exploring the dynamics of second language writing* (pp. 93-115). Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.
- Stotsky, S. (1983). Research on reading/writing relationships: A synthesis and suggested directions. *Language Arts*, 60(5), 627-642.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind and society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wang, P. (1998). Shilun yingxiang dangqian daxue yingyu jiaoxue de feizhengchang qingxiang [On the abnormal tendencies in influencing the current college English teaching]. *Waiyu Yu Waiyu Jiaoxue [Foreign Language and Foreign Language Teaching]*, 5, 29-30.
- Yang, Y. (2000, February). *History of English education in china (1919- 1998)*. Retrieved from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED441347.pdf>
- Yen, R. T. (1987). Foreign language teaching in China: Problems and perspectives. *Canadian and International Education*, 6(1), 48-61.