



# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

“Enjoyable”, “okay” or “rather pointless”? An exploration of Chinese and British students' views on innovative and traditional assignment types in UK universities

Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

Leedham, Maria (2008). “Enjoyable”, “okay” or “rather pointless”? An exploration of Chinese and British students' views on innovative and traditional assignment types in UK universities. In: Promoting Partnership: Responding to the Needs of the East Asian Learner in Higher Education, 12-13 Jul 2008, Portsmouth.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2008 Maria Leedham

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

[http://www.hum.port.ac.uk/slas/pastconferenceproceedings/eastasianlearners2008/files/LeedhamMaria\\_ppt.pdf](http://www.hum.port.ac.uk/slas/pastconferenceproceedings/eastasianlearners2008/files/LeedhamMaria_ppt.pdf)

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

# “Enjoyable”, “okay”, or “rather pointless”?



The Open University

**An exploration of Chinese and British students’ views on innovative and traditional assignment types in UK universities**

Maria Leedham  
m.e.leedham@open.ac.uk

## Outline



- Research Questions
- Chinese and British students’ views on writing:  
Data from student questionnaires
- ‘Innovative’ assignment types:  
Data from tutor interviews
- Students’ views of innovative assignments

2 of 26

## Research Questions



1. How do Chinese and British students plan and write assignments?
2. What are their views towards assignments?
3. How does each group cope with innovative assignments?

3 of 26

## Student questionnaire data 1



- Online survey (SurveyMonkey)
- Data collected in 2007-8
- Participants from previous research project (BAWE), contacts, Facebook, CSSAs,...
- 202 responses from Chinese and British students
- Wide range of disciplines
- Undergraduates years 1,2,3 & postgraduates
- Over 40 UK universities represented
- Follow-on questions on assignment types

4 of 26

## Student questionnaire data 2

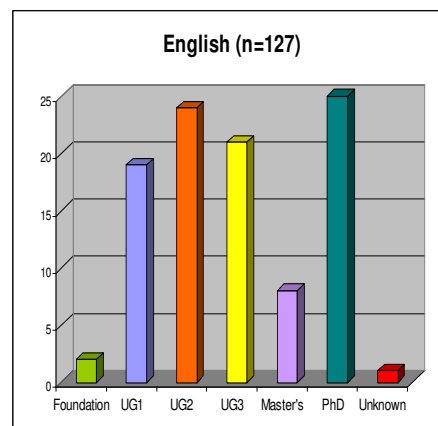
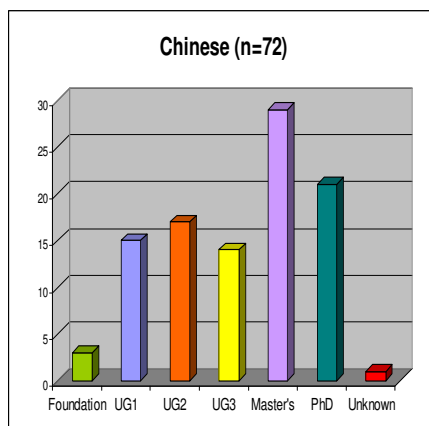


- Birkbeck
- Birmingham
- Bradford
- Cambridge
- Chichester
- Coventry
- Cranfield
- Edinburgh
- Essex
- Hull
- Imperial
- Keele
- King's College
- Lancaster
- Leeds
- Leeds Met
- Liverpool
- London Met
- Loughborough
- LSE
- Manchester
- Nottingham
- Open
- Oxford
- Oxford Brookes
- Reading
- Royal Holloway
- Sheffield
- SOAS
- Swansea
- Teesside
- UCL
- Warwick
- Westminster
- York

5 of 26

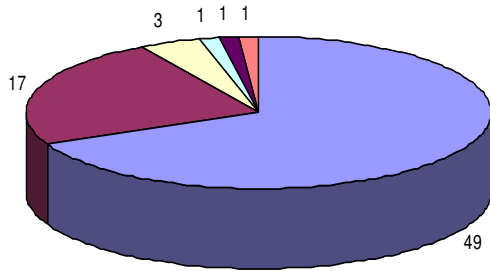
## Student questionnaire data 3

### Year Groups (as %)



6 of 26

### What is your first language?

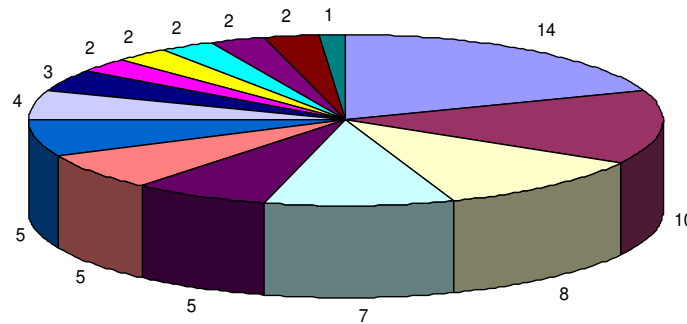


Raw figures

- Mandarin / Putonghua
- Cantonese / Yue
- Wu / Shanghainese
- Gan
- Hakka
- Minnan / Hokkien-

7 of 26

### What is your home province and country?

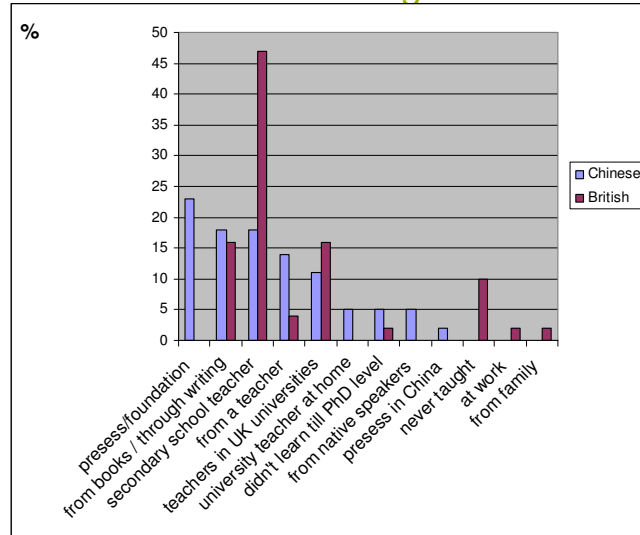


Raw figures

- Guangdong
- Other
- Beijing
- Shanghai
- Liaoning
- Zhejiang
- HONG KONG
- Jiangsu
- Hunan
- Jilin
- Shandong
- Shanxi
- TAIWAN
- Tianjin
- MALAYSIA

8 of 26

## Students' views on writing: Q1: Where and how were you taught about academic writing?



9 of 26

## Q1: Quotes from British Students



### Secondary School

- Probably secondary school, but I think i pretty much just picked it up as I went along.
- When doing 'A' level English the teacher said something about listing a few points and making them into paragraphs but that was all. I've always been very bad essay writer and it's contributed to the spectacular failure of my academic career.
- 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).
- never taught apart from some **hints and tips** at university

### Trial and Error

- Wasn't really taught; learned by imitation
- i have never been taught how to write academically, I'm slowly learning during the Master's course, learning through the mistakes I make.
- Half-day workshop offered for PhD students
- At uni I had one seminar in the first year but apart from that I have learnt through reading study skills books and trial and error, I still don't even know if I am doing it right but as I have passed so far I guess its ok.

10 of 26

## Q1: Quotes from Chinese students



### IELTS

- At High School, I learnt academic writing for IELTS text. i don't think I've been taught about academic writing till I came to UK
- I was never seriously taught about academic writing. The teacher in foundation course only gave me the tips in writing in IELTS.

### Practice

- Most of it is by reading, and loads of practice i guess.
- Follow textbook guidance, self-practice, through trials and errors and reading examples of academic writings.

### PhD

- Academic writing in English you mean? I think for me I only learn it after I started my PhD study, from reading papers and getting corrections from my supervisor.

11 of 26

## Students' views on writing: Q2: How do you plan and write your assignments at university?



### Chinese students

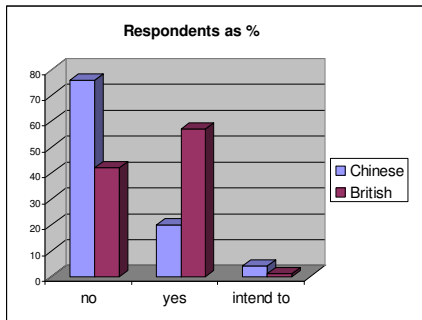
- Most write straight to a computer – but not all
- “yes, i write them on computer straight away, but I make changes afterwards.”
- “a draft plan in my brain and straight on to the computer.”
- “make a plan do some research write a draft”

### British students

- All but one mentioned planning of some kind.
- Most plan on paper first
- “Plans, drafts, suffering, more plans, more drafts, and submission.”
- “I write out plans by hand using various techniques since it makes better use of my time”

12 of 26

## Students' views on writing: Q3: Have you changed this way of planning and writing your assignments?



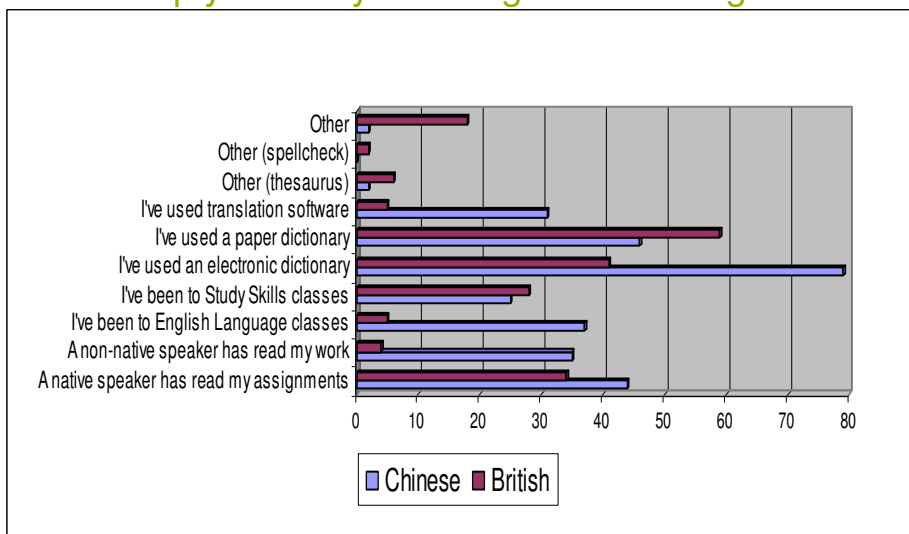
### Chinese

- no, just a habit.
- I had been used to write in Chinese firstly and then translate it. But afterward I switch to writing and planning at the same time.
- "Sometimes I think in Chinese... I know it's not good but it's inevitable".
- Still I am not good at planning things. I would start straight ahead.
- Yes, more systematic

### British

- No, I use the same method I learnt at school and it still works for me!
- Not really. I'd like to plan more, perhaps but time simply isn't there.
- Yes, I spend more time planning and checking through or re-drafting.
- Yes - I plan them before I write. Also, I've absorbed some of the 'style' appropriate to the discipline.
- i've developed it since starting uni, before<sup>13 of 26</sup> did it all by hand

## Students' views on writing: Q4: Which of the following have you ever used to help you with your assignment-writing?





## Students' views on writing:

### Q5: Generally, how do you feel about assignment writing at the moment? - Chinese students



#### Accomplishment

- After I finish it, I have a sense of accomplishment.
- I like assignment writing, I prefer it to exams.
- It's useful but hard
- challenging, yet enjoyable
- yes. I change from abomination to custom.

#### Improving

- writing assignments is challenging but rewarding... I enjoy it because I can see my improvement.
- Before I came to study here. I was not good at writing. Now I seem to enjoy it. It is a good way to manifest my English skill.
- At beginning, it's tough as the way is very different from what I was required in my homecountry.

#### Don't enjoy it

- I do not enjoy it because I always have to rush to meet the deadline.
- I don't enjoy it. but it improve my English as well.
- Nervous
- It should have been much more useful if there had been an assignment clinic.
- 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.
- it's really difficult. I always worry about my grammar and my expression.

15 of 26

### Q5: Generally, how do you feel about assignment writing at the moment? – British students



#### “sense of satisfaction”

- useful and enjoyable
- I really like writing assignments because you feel a sense of satisfaction... especially if you get a good mark
- Enjoy it, learn a lot. But i stress about deadlines.
- helpful for thinking things through.
- I like writing but just procrastinate
- Love it. I've always enjoyed writing. I find it useful for consolidating my thoughts.
- i enjoy essay writing over other forms of assessments, eg exams, posters

#### “painful” “pointless”

- I find writing painful, stressful, like drawing teeth... I don't think it gets easier - but more and more difficult.
- It is useful to organise my thoughts but it is time consuming and boring to do
- Much of it rather pointless

#### Changing attitude

- I've become more confident about my writing.
- I now understand that the difficulties of writing remain even when you're experienced - it's just that you accept them as part of the process.
- It's OK once I've really got into it but I struggle to get started and am finder this harder and harder
- Writing is always a challenge for me; when it's going well, time passes while I am unaware. When I am struggling, it is the hardest task in the world.
- Im suprised how little help we get with writing our assignments at university, espically considering the fact that we had a whole module in a semseter on how to use a PC.

16 of 26

## Data from tutor interviews 1



- Part of the British Academic Written English project
- **58** semi-structured interviews
- **20** disciplines
- **3** universities: Warwick, Reading, Oxford Brookes

### Example Questions:

1. What role does assignment-writing play in your department?
2. What's the purpose of assignment-writing rather than exams?
3. What types of written assignment do you set?

17 of 26

## Data from tutor interviews 2 :The Essay



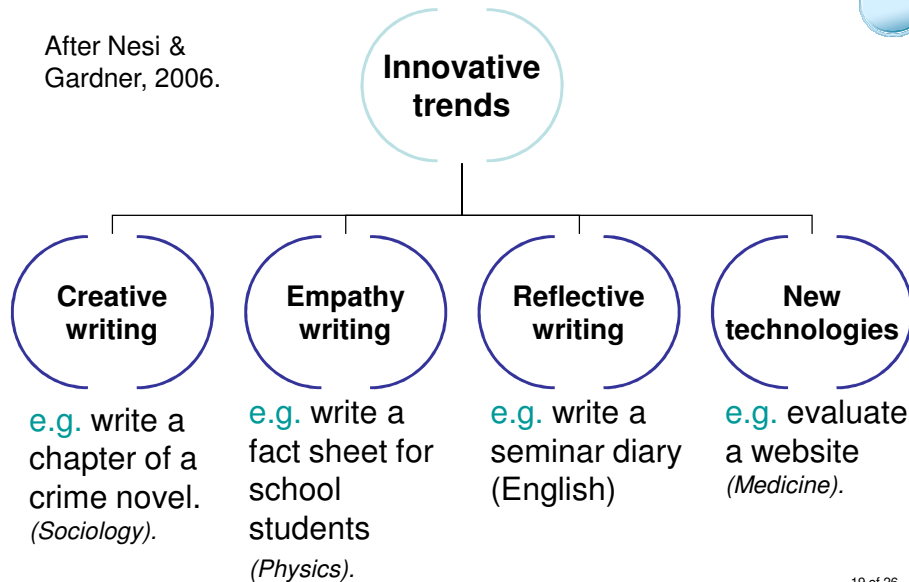
- The essay is the '*default genre*' (Andrews, 2003:117)
- 19 /20 disciplines include 'essays'
  
- 'we're quite a traditional department' (*Sociology*).
- 'I think we could experiment more' (*History*).
- 'It has been the convention to use essays. I would like to break away from that.' (*Psychology*).
- Essays don't encourage students to do 'more interesting' pieces of work. (*Computing*).
- 'we've tried to move slightly away from standardised assessment and towards more innovative forms'. (*English*).

18 of 26

## Data from tutor interviews 3: Innovation

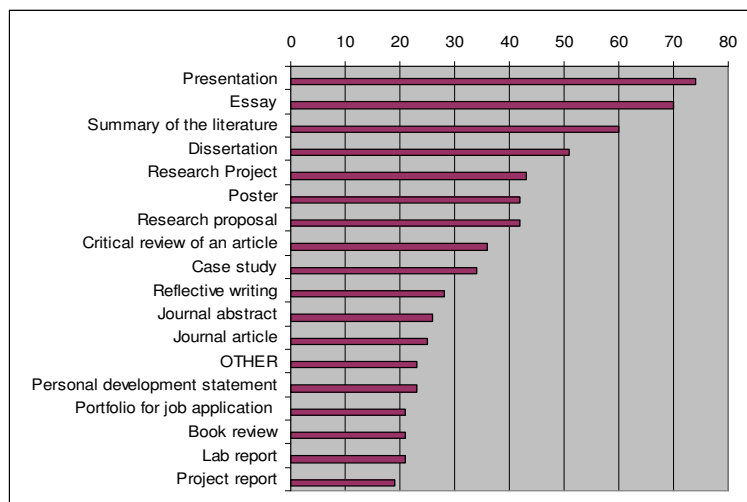


After Nesi & Gardner, 2006.



19 of 26

## Back to - Students' views on writing: Types of assignments done in current course



20 of 26

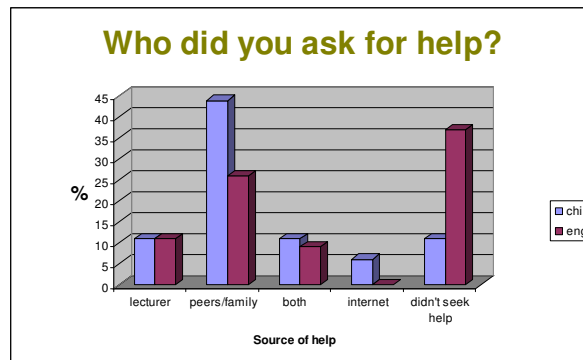
## “Other” types ticked



- Persuasive writing
- Problem sheets
- Website evaluation/development
- Marketing proposal / Business plan
- Case notes
- Field Study
- Business or other letter
- Group reflective essay
- Narrative fiction
- Crossword / Quiz
- Creative writing
- Technical writing

21 of 26

## Who did you ask for help?



- Both groups encountered many new assignment types on their current course.
- Chinese students more likely to seek help.
- Chinese students more likely to ask peers than tutor.

22 of 26

## Students' views on writing: Misunderstanding the assignment



### Chinese students

- I always find that it is hard to argue critically in my assignment, especially in business field assignments.
- about where should i focus on.
- only due to \*\*\*\*\* wording of question which were ambiguous

### British students

- did not understand the level of detail necessary.
- wrong angle and not interpreting the question correctly
- not correctly answered in a critical way
- too vague or not offering enough supporting evidence
- I have sometimes not done what I was supposed to do, but I was conscious of this and willing to take the hit of being marked down accordingly to do work which I wanted to do

28 of 26

## Some points on innovative assignments



- Students in UK universities are required to understand a wide range of text types and more text-specific help would be beneficial (*Hewings and Hewings, 2001*).
- Chinese universities have more traditional assignments and more written exams => students are less used to innovative assignment types (*Nield, 2004, Cross & Hitchcock, 2007*).
- Tutors could help more, eg they could:
  1. pilot new assignments
  2. have class discussions of the rubric
  3. provide model answers
  4. enlist help of peers / previous cohorts

24 of 26

## RQs Revisited



1. How do Chinese and British students plan and write assignments?
2. What are their views towards assignments?
3. How does each group cope with innovative assignments?

25 of 26

## References



- Andrews, R. (2003) 'The end of the essay?', in *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8,1:117-128.
- British Academic Written English project.  
<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/celte/research/bawe/overview/>  
ESRC project number RES-000-23-0800
- British Council 2007. 'China Market Introduction'. Downloaded from <http://www.britishcouncil.org/eumd-information-background-china.htm>
- Cross, J. & Hitchcock, R. 2007 'Chinese students' (or students from China's) views of UK HE: differences, difficulties and benefits, and suggestions for facilitating transition. In *The East Asian Learner*, 3,2:1-31.
- Hewings, A. & Hewings, M. 2001 'Approaches to the study of disciplinary variation in academic writing: implications for syllabus design', in David R. Hall, and Ann Hewings (eds.) *Innovation in English language teaching*, pp. 71-83. A reader. Open University/Routledge.
- Leedham, M. (forthcoming, 2009) 'From traditional essay to 'Ready Steady Cook' presentation: reasons for innovative changes in assignments' In *Active Learning in HE*.
- Nesi, H. and S. Gardner (2006) '[Variation in Disciplinary Culture: University Tutors' Views on Assessed Writing Tasks](#)', in Richard Kiely, Gerald Clibbon, Pauline Rea-Dickins, and Helen Woodfield, (eds) *Language, Culture and Identity in Applied Linguistics* (British Studies in Applied Linguistics, 21) London: Equinox Publishing.
- Nield, K. 2004 Questioning the myth of the Chinese learner. In *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 16,3:186-196.

26 of 26