Towards English Writing Research with Chinese Characteristics

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Abstract

This essay first reviews the history of English writing research in China, focusing on the way that though Chinese students negotiated multiple languages and cultures, nationalism and positivism oriented most teachers and researchers to treating native English speakers as the target audience of student writing. The essay then reviews the research reported in this special issue. These studies have advanced English writing research in China by examining writing at secondary, college, and graduate levels, the multi-dimensional feedback that student writers receive, and identity construction in student texts. The essay concludes by pointing out avenues for future research in this area.

Key words: writing process; positivism; qualitative research

What a great effort it must have been to bring together an outstanding cohort of scholars to address the teaching of English writing in the Chinese context. Most papers generated in this endeavor emphasize Chineseness in their titles. Some questions may be posed here: What characterizes Chinese student writing in English? What makes these pedagogical and research projects Chinese? How can we ethically attend to the socio-cultural dimensions of our work, which is based in China and ultimately serves the needs of local teachers and students? To gauge the work assembled in this special issue, we must understand the tradition of English writing research in China—both its good practices and missteps. In this article, I first survey the historical efforts of Chinese teachers and scholars in teaching English writing. After a clear overview of the traditions gained, I proceed to evaluate this group of studies against both the traditions and conventions in second language writing studies.
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**English Writing Research in China**

The earliest scholarship regarding the teaching of English writing in China that I could find was W.A.P. Martin’s book, *A Cycle of Cathay; or, China, South and North, with Personal Reminiscences* (1896). The first head of Tong Wen Guan, Martin described how Chinese students learned to write English and provided a student essay in his book. The essay has emblematically shown that historically Chinese students had to negotiate cross-cultural values and appropriate their multilingual resources when writing in English, a tongue allegedly not their own. At Tong Wen Guan, Western teachers secretly taught religion, a subject forbidden by the Qin government. Students practiced writing in English on religious topics, often tacitly challenging and resisting established authorities. In the essay cited by Martin, for example, a student writer deliberated on the Christian God as follows:

All the human beings of the various nations throughout the world should respect the God; because he is the source from which the wealth, happiness, blessing, etc., are derived, and it is he who gives fortune or misfortune to the people. Although people cannot see his appearance, yet they should respect him as though he is in the presence before their eyes; because he can secretly give rewards to those who have done good deeds, and punishment to those who are bad. (qtd. in Martin, 1896: 298)

On one hand, the student displaced and disturbed the authoritative Christian teaching in the text, rearticulating biblical messages through culturally mediated terms. For example, “the God” has never been standard usage among Anglo-American Christians. The Bible says relatively little about receiving wealth because of faith, and the connection of “wealth”, “happiness”, and “blessing” is unusual from an Anglo-American Christian point of view. Similarly, to “respect” God is not a typical Christian expression; usually “worship” or “fear” would be used. The use of “respect” may come from the Chinese expressions *bai* 拜 or *jingbai* 敬拜. Through mimicry, the student undermined the authority of his evangelical professors who were obsessed with proselytizing and subverted the authorization of their biblical representations. On the other hand, the student mocked the arrogance of the Chinese monarchy. By portraying an omnipresent and omnipotent God as transcending all nations, the emperor’s self-proclaimed heavenly power was challenged, which explains why the government opposed religious teaching in the academy. In the selective adoption of Western learning, as the student essay shows, English played a catalytic role, enabling the students to ruminate on and respond to Western subjects in bilingual and multicultural codes more resistant to government censorship. More examples of Chinese students negotiating cultural and linguistic issues over the last century can be found in my historical study of English composition in China (You, 2010).

English composition pedagogies have perpetuated monolithic assumptions about English and Anglo-American people and thus clashed with Chinese students’ writing practices since the early years. In the late Qing dynasty, most mission schools offered English composition courses; government schools followed suit. The textbooks used in
those courses were mostly imported from the United States. Composition, together with other English courses, stressed the basics of the English language. Skimming over college catalogs published during the first half of the twentieth century, one can easily notice an unequivocal emphasis in freshman and sophomore English on grammar and oral practice alongside literary readings and weekly themes. Students often failed writing tasks for writing with a strong Chinese accent. An American teacher, for example, complained about Chinese logic in students’ English essays: “Students rarely place the subject of the sentence first. I have checked composition after composition where every sentence began with a prepositional phrase or clause. The key to clear, simple, and direct writing is the location of the subject in the sentence. It usually goes first” (Brown, 1941: 77). For native English speakers, beginning a sentence with a prepositional phrase to denote the setting of an action or a state of being seemed disturbingly confusing, complicated, and indirect. This monolithic notion of native English and its native speakers has deeply percolated in the field of English teaching and later research of English teaching in China.

English composition scholarship underwent a strong drive for both localization and internationalization during the 1990s. Influenced by international scholarship in applied linguistics and composition, published research moved quickly from sheer classroom observations to more systematic investigations using quantitative and qualitative methods. Issues related to teaching writing to non-English majors received much more attention as they came to constitute the majority of college students. The heavily researched areas included the difficulties faced by students in English writing, their composing processes, writing pedagogies, computers and writing, and the interaction of Chinese and Anglo-American rhetorical traditions. Apparently, Chinese scholars borrowed these topics from American composition studies and ESL writing and used them as parameters to examine English composition in the Chinese context.

Research of Chinese students’ writing processes has been particularly enlightening to bilingual writing practice. Modeling studies by Linda Flower, John Hayes, Sondra Perl, and Vivian Zamel, Chinese scholars have used think-aloud protocols to trace students’ mental activities. Unlike American researchers, who had only focused on composing in English, Chinese scholars sought the differences between students’ composing processes in both Chinese and English. Among them, Zhang (1995) and Wang & Wen (2002) confirmed findings about ESL composition in other countries, such as the recursive nature of composing processes and the similarities and differences in writers when composing in their first and second languages. More importantly, both studies showed that Chinese plays a positive, enabling role in students’ English writing processes. Empirically, they confirmed teachers’ traditional, experiential knowledge that translation could be an effective strategy in second or foreign language writing.

While applied linguistics offered Chinese scholars theoretical guidance, it hindered critical studies of English writing. Applied linguists promoted a positivist epistemology about language and language teaching in China. The positivist epistemology holds that we can best understand language or language teaching by breaking it up into discrete parts. Applied linguists accordingly searched for the elements whose removal from a causal chain would alter the outcome of language learning and language performance. In composition
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research, for instance, it was believed that if the construct of students’ English writing based on skill levels could be established, then we could predict and control the outcomes of their English writing performance (Grabe, 2001). Due to its positivist orientation, composition research focused on those aspects that could be studied objectively, such as the students’ composing processes and products. Other “nondiscursive” aspects—such as broad sociocultural contexts, language-in-education policies, institutional establishments, student voice and identity, and teachers’ socioeconomic conditions—were hardly researched at all.

An example of the negative influence of positivist epistemology emerged in a series of studies on Chinese students’ rhetorical preferences during the 1990s. Taking a structuralist view of writing, these studies reduced rhetorical practices to textual organization. Furthermore, these studies embodied a strong assumption that Anglo-American English speakers were the only legitimate users of English and were, thus, the audience and the arbitrator of Chinese students’ writing. For instance, when Zhao (1995) asked his Chinese students and a native English speaker to respond to an English essay written by a Chinese student, he found that Chinese- and English-speaking audiences preferred different reasoning patterns in expository writing. It lead him to draw the following pedagogical implication: “The unique reasoning patterns commonly found in Chinese written discourse, such as the thesis statement appearing in the end, appearing in the middle, or hidden in the text, leads to a negative transfer in Chinese students’ English writing. The teacher should never underestimate the greater harm caused by these patterns” (p. 26). Zhao failed to recognize the fluidity of language, audience, and the rhetorical situation. Although students were writing hypothetically for a native-speaker audience, in reality students tried to communicate with their Chinese audiences (i.e., teachers and peers) who truly mattered in the rhetorical situation (i.e., class assignments or tests). Positivist epistemology constricted scholars to a static, essentialized view of English language, Anglo-American people, and their cultures.

New Grounds and Perennial Issues

In comparing the studies gathered here against traditional English writing research in China, I believe they have broken three major grounds. The most prominent contribution comes from the concerted efforts to understand students’ writing practices at both the high school and the graduate level. Until recent years, most studies on English writing in China have focused on college students. Four studies in this collection unveiled to us the challenges, struggles, and strategies that graduate students have experienced when writing in their disciplines. In “Academic Identity Construction in Writing the Discussion & Conclusion Section” (thereafter “Academic Identity”), the author illuminated the importance of socialization in shaping graduate students’ academic identity. They need not only to acquire academic conventions and disciplinary knowledge but also to interact with the wider community in their disciplines. In “Problems and Strategies in Learning to Write a Thesis Proposal” (thereafter “Thesis Proposal”), the author identified
the challenges that six MA students had encountered in writing their thesis proposals for a teacher education program. They adopted different strategies in negotiating with their thesis advisors and learning from peers. In “Application of Topic Knowledge in Graduate EFL Academic Writing in China” (thereafter “Topic Knowledge”), the two authors surveyed more than 400 first-year non-English major MA students on how they marshaled topic knowledge in their academic writing. The students were found to rely heavily on personal experience, subjective perspective, and single source data. In “Strategies Used by Chinese Students of English in Constructing Clause and Rhetorical Relations of Text” (thereafter “Clause and Rhetorical Relations”), the author asked 42 MA students of Linguistics to reconstruct an expository text by bringing fragmental clauses together. These students tended to rely on cohesive devices, such as anaphoric references and repetitions, rather than meaning relations in their textual reconstruction activity. Taken together, these studies shed important light on the increasingly expanding graduate level writing population in China as they acquire English writing skills in their disciplines.

A joint effort by a university professor and a secondary school teacher to understand high school students’ writing practice deserves equal praise. In “The Effects of Positive Self-Evaluation on Senior High School Student’s English Writing Performance and Writing Self-Efficacy” (thereafter “Positive Self-Evaluation”), the two authors conducted an experiment to assess the effects of training students to perform positive self-evaluation in teaching English writing. The positive correlation that they unveiled between positive self-evaluation and both students’ writing performance and writing self-efficacy affirms the viability of the “High School English Curriculum Standards” postulated by the Ministry of Education. This piece of research offers a glimpse into a new trend in English writing research and in general English education research in China: researchers in higher education have begun to direct their attention to primary and secondary English education and work closely with teachers in these settings.

The second area of significant contribution is the in-depth explorations of various forms of feedback during the student composing process, such as teacher feedback and student self-evaluation. In “A Study of Error Feedback on EFL Writings by Chinese Tertiary Teachers of English” (thereafter “Error Feedback”), the authors studied teacher feedback practices by surveying 120 students and 60 teachers across three universities. The teachers adopted both comprehensive and selective modes of error feedback, slightly favoring selective feedback. They tended to provide feedback on syntactic structures, verbs, and word choices, preferring direct feedback and hinting at the location of errors over coded feedback. Studies on error feedback are numerous, most of them focusing on whether error feedback is effective or not. In “Positive Self-Evaluation”, the authors examined the feedback generated by the student writers themselves. These two studies have contributed to this strand of writing studies by delving into the minds of both students and teachers as critical readers.

The third highlight comes from the attention paid to the student writer’s identity. One’s identity comes from what he or she identifies with. In “Academic Identity”, the author reveals to us how the six doctoral students gradually improved the discussion and conclusion sections of their dissertations by varying what they identified with. In
the beginning, they were unfamiliar with discourse conventions of their disciplines and incompetent in content organization as well as rhetorical structure. They gradually improved in these areas through learning and interacting with scholars in their respective fields. Over time they transitioned from a novice student writer to a member of the disciplinary community. In “The Interpersonal Functions of Epistemic Modality in Academic English Writing” (thereafter “Epistemic Modality”), the author proposes that in academic writing epistemic modality helps to construct different types of writer identity, writer-reader relation, and certain discourse communities. Taking a critical discourse analysis approach, the author reminds us that as a social act, academic writing will inevitably involve power relations; appropriate uses of epistemic modality will construct a fitting writer identity and writer-reader relationship, thus playing a key role in successful academic communication. Taking a socio-cultural and postmodern view of writing activities, we shall no longer see writing as a mechanical, transparent process in the communication triangle. As writers, we are reconstructed by our writing activities.

While breaking new ground, these studies have also manifested or reminded us of some perennial issues in teaching and researching English writing in China. First, all studies reported here deal with writing in the school setting. Working in universities, most of the authors chose to study student writings at different academic levels. This is a choice, conceivably, made for both convenience and personal interests. However, further studies in the field of English writing in China need to look beyond the educational institution. Schools are just one of many domains where Chinese students will write English. An understanding of how they use English in extracurricular contexts and society at large will help deepen our appreciation of English, both its standards and its multiplicity in actual use. We will be able to help our students not only pass various exams and communicate within their academic communities, but also use the language for other purposes that matter to them. My recent studies on the use of English by Chinese college students and white collar workers on the Internet show that they are engaged in numerous communicative contexts and produced multiple genres (You, 2008, 2011).

Second, a few studies continue to perpetuate a deficiency model when studying Chinese student essays. Champions of this model take on the native speaker’s writing as the norms and standards. Judged against these norms, Chinese student writing is viewed as non-standard, incorrect, and inferior. In reality, however, language use is always fluid and varied. Even native speakers disavow these norms and standards in teaching writing. Treating student writing as a set of deviations from the mystified native-speaker norms has subjugated both the teachers and students to the Anglo-American culture. In “Topic Knowledge”, the author states: “A formal style and an objective perspective are characteristic of academic writing. However, subjects in our study tended to use subjective perspectives more frequently than objective perspectives.” The author’s stance here on academic writing is over generalization. Subjective perspectives are prevalent in humanities writings if not in social sciences writings. In “Epistemic Modality”, the author states: “To sum up, it is a common practice for native English writers to use weak modal expressions or hedging devices in presenting their new points of view.” To demonstrate the differences
between native and non-native speaking writers’ hedging practices, the author quotes from an established British scholar and a Chinese writer (probably a college student). The issue here is whether the hedging practices are a native-versus-non-native issue or an issue having more to do with experience in academic writing. In “Clause and Rhetorical Relations”, the author asks her students to reconstruct a text originally written by a native speaker. She notes the students’ rhetorical preferences: “There are grouping tendencies, though incorrect, that may reveal strategies that are popularly used by Chinese students of English.” The implication is that only the native speaking writer’s way is correct. Further, she states: “the most important and long-term goal of teaching discourse analysis to Chinese learners of English through reading or writing should be the teaching of English text cognitive structuring model (i.e., from general to specific or the deductive logic) in construing English text.” She implies that either only English texts use “from general to specific or the deductive logic” or English texts only use “from general to specific or the deductive logic”. In reality, Chinese academic writing since the Han dynasty (206BCE – 220CE) or even earlier has displayed these logical patterns (You & Liu, 2008). In addition to these patterns, English texts use other logical patterns as well, such as induction and “chrono-logic”, according to which a writer structures his or her thoughts rigorously as they occur associatively over time (Heilker, 1996). As writing teachers and researchers, we should stop taking a static view towards English, native speakers, and non-native speaker texts. Writers, whether native or non-native, always compose with some consciousness of the rhetorical contexts, including their communicative purposes and their audiences.

Third, if we can agree upon some general practices in social science research, these practices have not been vigorously applied to some studies. One of the prominent oversights comes from the lack of clear analytical frameworks or coding schemes. Social scientists emphasize replicability in experimental and case studies. Without providing a clear analytical frame or coding scheme, the reader will find the study hard to follow and interested scholars will not be able to replicate the study to either test its validity or make comparisons across contexts and populations. For example, in “Academic Identity”, the author states: “interview data were coded based on the researcher’s reiterative examinations of each of the transcribed texts and the pertinence to the central research question as well as the interview questions.” The author has failed to clearly articulate her research questions and provide interview questions in the article. Without a clear analytical framework, how the author has identified the three categories of academic identity in the findings sections becomes a mystery. Similarly in “Thesis Proposal”, the author’s coding scheme is unclear in Section 4.2. She places the six MA students’ coping strategies in proposal writing under two headings—“Negotiations with supervisors” and “Learning from peers”. The reader is left to wonder how she has identified these two groups of copying strategies, and also whether there is a more productive way to code the student copying strategies. Other remiss areas include not providing adequate information about the coding process or enough information about the institutional context where the study is performed. For example, in the study “Topic Knowledge”, the authors studied how first year graduate students apply topic knowledge in their writings. However, it is unclear what the goals of the graduate English course were in the first semester, whether the course
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focused on academic writing, or what the writing tasks were. The authors should not assume that their audience to be familiar with graduate English courses in China.

To seek the Chineseness in our research means to understand the features of Chinese student writing and, ultimately, to serve the interests of Chinese students and teachers. A special issue on English writing research will be a historical landmark in this collective effort. English writing study is an emergent field in China—seven national conferences and ensuing conference proceedings have been exclusively devoted to it over the last ten years, and numerous articles were published in this area over the last three decades. As my review has revealed, we are always shaped by the tradition of teaching and researching English writing in China. This tradition must be kept in view while staying in touch with the international and domestic conversations.

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References


