A Contrastive Perspective on the Narrativeness of English Writings of Chinese and NES Authors*

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Abstract

Most studies that contrast EFL writings of Chinese authors with writings of native English speakers (NES) have pinpointed various differences in terms of their organizational and interpersonal propensities. Fewer studies, however, have looked into the types of substance that the authors incorporate into their writings, and this poses the question of whether Chinese and NES authors tend to capitalize on different types of content to flesh out their topics. This paper is concerned with the potential difference between writings of Chinese authors and NES authors in their inclination to include narratives into their writings. For this purpose, a method of quantifying narratives has been proposed that involves the identifying and tallying of “events”, “narrative sequences” and several other elements of narrative discourse. The writings which were studied and compared were English career autobiographies supplied by 24 Chinese and 21 NES authors. The study has found that the English writings of Chinese authors are significantly more narrative than those of their counterparts.

Key words: contrastive rhetoric; narrative discourse; narrativeness

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a gradual shift of attention by contrastive rhetoric (CR) scholars from in-depth analysis of linguistic forms in text to a view of text as situated activities requiring understanding of its dynamics (Connor, 2002; Thatcher, 2004). This is mentioned to be the reason why intercultural rhetoric (IR) is conjured up as a surrogate

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term for CR to take into account the great fluidity in the influence of culture and other contextual factors (Connor, 2004). However, it would be wrong to proclaim that text should be completely marginalized in the purview of CR or IR. On the contrary, most CR studies have just become more context-sensitive text analysis where text still offers the entry point of these studies.

Most CR/IR studies of EFL writings with a focus on text have dealt with one or both of the two categories of discursive features: textual features of texts and metatextual features of texts, or using the terms of systemic functional linguistics, the textual and interpersonal functions of texts. The interest of CR studies in textual or organizational features dates back to the 1960s when Kaplan (1966) first published his work on CR, which was mostly devoted to the study of paragraph organization. Since then, an array of concepts and instruments have been applied to the CR studies of textual patterns favored by writers from different cultures: topical structures, thematization, cohesion and coherence, etc. (see Allison, Varghese & Wu, 1999; Hawes & Thomas, 1997; Simpson, 2000). The conclusions of many studies that involve the writings by Chinese authors are well known: the cyclical development dominates Chinese texts and the linear development is essential to English texts (Scollon, Scollon & Kirkpatrick, 1998; Liu, 1999; Kaplan, 1988); Chinese and English writings are different in the frequency with which inductive organizations and deductive organizations appear; Chinese writers work in favor of parataxis while hypotaxis is the rule for maintaining cohesion in English texts (Lian, 1993); coherence of Chinese texts builds on temporal and spatial relations (Jia, 1997; Lian, 1993). On the other front of investigation, there has recently been a surge of interest in the interpersonal features of texts, producing a large number of studies on various aspects of texts’ potential to engage the readers. To name a few, studies have been done on modality, hedging, evaluation, attitudes, and stance (see Donohue, 2006; Shaw, 2003; Vassileva, 2001).

In contrast with the great proportion of attention that CR scholars have paid to the textual and interpersonal features of texts, much less attention has been assigned to the ideational features of EFL writings. In fact, it is simply convenient for people to take the EFL writers’ choice of content for granted by assuming that EFL and NES texts are not as radically different from each other in terms of content as in organization and writer-reader interaction. The latter two aspects of writing are often seen as more obvious deliberations of the writer and demonstrate greater intercultural variation. However, studying the types of content or ideational choices that EFL and NES authors prefer in their writings can bring up answers to some of the fundamental questions about CR and EFL writing: Are there culture specific norms regarding the pertinence of different types of content in compositions? Do EFL and NES authors cognize writing tasks differently? Do they operationalize different cognitive processes for the tasks and use different cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies? Considering the still mounting interest in the textual and metatextual features of EFL among the CR researchers, however, it is no wonder that fewer efforts have been committed to the study of the peculiarities about the ideational makeup of EFL writings, that is, the types of experiences and ideas that are typically represented in these writings. Of course, one of the exceptions to this observation is a general interest
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in what is often known as citations in research writings and quotations in other academic discourses. Topics of this kind include citations, quotations, plagiarism, and attitudes to proverbs and sayings (see Pecorari, 2003; Wong, 1992).

This paper intends to help fill in this lacuna of knowledge concerning the major types of content adopted by NES and Chinese EFL authors by looking into whether they have different preferences when selecting content for their writings. In other words, this study is expected to provide findings that can enrich our understanding of the issue of whether Chinese and NES authors tend to capitalize on different types of content to flesh out their topics. The specific facet of this complex issue that this paper brings into focus is the degrees of narrativeness in English compositions by Chinese and NES writers. In this paper, narrativeness is construed as the tendency for a text to include accounts of events or happenings and other elements of stories. This study is characterized by its employment of a contrastive quantitative method; therefore, a means of quantifying narratives has been conceived, which represents an approach that has yet to be appreciated as orthodox in narratological studies of literature.

2. Construing Narrativeness

2.1 Narratives and narrativeness

When seeking a perspective on the ideational makeup of English writings of Chinese and NES authors, one is naturally inspired by the Systemic Functional Grammar proposed by M.A.K. Halliday, which is best known for isolating the ideational dimension of language, i.e., its metafunction of representing experiences. Six different process types are enunciated, which correspond with six distinctive types of human experiences (Halliday, 1994). Following the Hallidayan approach to analyzing linguistic expressions of experiences, this study considers processes as basic units of human experiences that are construed in clauses and metaphoric forms of clauses. Besides, it also shares the Hallidayan view that experiences forming the basis for content of writings can be classified by categorizing them into different processes. However, this study is not intended to investigate the distribution of the six process types in EFL and NES writings; instead, it adopts a more pusillanimous approach—with only two classifications: human experiences that are dynamic processes resulting in changes and those experiences that take the form of static or lasting knowledge about the world. The former type of experiences is expressed in narrative discourse which serves to report events or happenings, and the extent to which narrative discourse permeates writings is hereby termed narrativeness. The reason why this contrast between narrative and non-narrative is relevant to the purpose of this study is that the extent of narrative elements in writings reveals the authors’ preference to using either static or dynamic processes as materials for the content of their writings.

The term narrativeness is occasionally used in narratological studies or studies of narratives to represent the characteristics of narratives, as most often in literary theory and literary criticism. A typical view of a narrative is that it is an account of a series of past events that are contingent on one another, and Prince (2008) defines narrativeness as a
set of traits characterizing narratives intensionally. It should be noted, however, that the connotations of narrativeness and narratives which are proposed by narratologists have to be expanded in two ways in this paper to serve the purpose of investigating non-literary EFL writing. First, narrativeness is studied here as a measure of the density of information about events, happenings or processes within texts with much less interest in the nature and morphology of tales. Therefore, the minimal unit of analysis is determined to be an event with or without contingency on another. By contrast, many narratologists insist that the narrative should consist of more than two events contingent on each other in order to qualify as a story or plot. Second, this study does not limit narratives to accounts of past events, as it also investigates the authors’ treatment of information that can be verbalized as a sequence of processes (e.g., a description of a chemical reaction in a course book). Narratologists, however, rigorously study events of the past.

2.2 Defining events and narrative sequences

It has been already said above that this study approaches narrative discourse from a much wider perspective than narratological studies usually do; that is, narratives are less rigorously defined since the study is less concerned with the ways discourses that people intuit as stories unfold in the texts than the presence of a wide range of ingredients of narratives and process description in the text. In addition, it has also been mentioned that it is highly desirable to have a set of exact criteria for these “ingredients” so that they can be consistently quantified in the texts. For these two reasons, we need to first highlight several of these recognizable “ingredients” of narratives that can be studied quantitatively.

Instead of analyzing a narrative into several stages of development, this study focuses on distinctive elements that thread the stages of a narrative, ignoring other elements that are merely accessory to the narrative. This simplification of the task helps us achieve a reliable quantification of important features of narrative discourse by distinguishing them from those whose presence in a narrative is more or less elective. These essential elements take the form of processes and their grammatical metaphors, in terms of the Hallidayan grammar that implicate changes or consequences as a narrative, cannot evolve without changes that affect the relevant circumstances. It is our belief that stories have essentially to do with changes happening to various participants related to the events and our quantitative analysis of narrativeness should deal with those clauses denoting such changes. Changes should be understood in a broad sense: they range from the most visible changes encoded in material processes to the least perceivable changes in some mental processes. The following examples illustrate processes of different types that denote changes and they are arranged in descending order of obviousness:

**Material process**
Example: We **reid** our kitchen for $6000. (The kitchen’s condition was changed.)

**Existential process**
Example: The crisis **happened** when underwriting standards were lowered and people who should not have gotten loans got them. (The crisis means a radical change in the market.)

**Relational process**
Example: In 1966, he was elected Governor of California by a margin of a million votes. (His status was changed.)

**Behavioral process**

Example: She cried over her lost pet. (She behaved differently after she lost her pet.)

**Verbal process**

Example: She said we should keep in touch over the summer. (A statement was made that changed the listener’s knowledge of the world.)

**Mental process**

Example: We changed our mind on a whim when we saw an exit for Route 30. (Their mind was changed when their understanding of the world was altered.)

There is also a gray area where some processes implicate changes that hardly materialize perceivably.

Example: I thought about it for a while. (He didn’t think about it before; therefore, his attention has just been shifted to the matter.)

Example: They called his office but he did nothing about it. (By refusing to take action, he violated people’s expectations and even social conventions. Therefore, his inaction has impact on people’s judgment of him, changing it in an undesirable way.)

As is indicated above, the study also acknowledges processes narrated in the present and future tenses as narrative because it is also interested in the writers’ use of information about temporal sequences as opposed to information about logical relationships. Changes rendered in the present and future tenses provoke senses of repeatability; that is, they have the potential to be reproduced. For example,

In the morning we cook breakfast for the men before they head off to work. (Food is created repeatedly.)

In this study, two types of items indicating changes in the above mentioned senses are expected to contribute to the buildup of narratives at two levels: *events* and the *narrative sequences*, both of which are identified within Halliday’s Transitivity system. An *event* is the minimal unit of narratives; it usually appears in a form of a clause which represents one or several changes. As an experience of a peculiar kind, an *event* is involved with a process which is momentary or can last for a definite period of time in order to be repeatable. Furthermore, temporal circumstantial elements, if any, of an event often set up a moment or a measurable period of time. For the participants in an event, their status or quality should be affected by the event; for example, they come into being or are reduced as a result of the event. Therefore, many relational and existential processes are not considered instances of events. For example, “There is a bus stop near my house” does not introduce the reader to an event because a definite period of time is not even implied by this statement and material and mental realities are not changed in the process associated with this statement.
Narrative sequences consist of successive constituent events, which are temporally related according to their reference times. While there can be lapses of time between successive events of a narrative sequence, overlaps are not allowed between their reference times. For example,

“I have been doing morning exercise since last winter.” and
“I work harder at it this year.”

do not form a narrative sequence. Narrative sequences can also be very complex when a constituent event of a sequence can be developed into another narrative sequence. For example, “He has developed many hobbies” can be developed into a narrative sequence marked by reference times such as “in the elementary school” and “in high school”. Expressions and structures that help the reader recognize the reference times are called sequence markers. A variety of linguistic forms are potentially sequence markers: temporal adjuncts/clauses (e.g., after that, then), tense contrasts (was) and verbs with meanings of temporality. They are illustrated in the following three examples:

After we went through the second door, Buff stood without moving and he looked at the trees and didn’t say anything. (Temporal clause)
I had already arrived, but was then told to wait in the lobby. (Tense contrast and temporal adjunct)
The news came that the financial market was probably going to face hard times. Investors began to adjust their investment strategies. (Verb with a temporal meaning)

3. Methodology

The NES writings investigated in this study are 21 career autobiographies that were found in An Introduction to Job Applications (Farr & Christophersen, 1999) and Protocols: Writing and Composition (Gunner, 2000), both of which identify these autobiographies as genuine compositions of job applicants. As one major element of job applications that many employers demand to see, the career autobiography gives an account of the applicant’s work experiences and helps complete his profile. These 21 NES examples were then compared with 24 career autobiographies composed by Chinese writers who were being trained to write career autobiographies for job applications and had been introduced to the same writing context that the NES authors faced. The Chinese writers who supplied these EFL samples were employees from local businesses who came to a Chinese university for in-service training.

The study began with obtaining the raw frequency counts of the above mentioned narrative features that appear in the 45 writings. Specifically speaking, the numbers of events, narrative sequences, and sequence markers in the writings were counted and normalized to a length of 100 words. In addition, the tenses of the verbs with which the events were narrated and the types of the sequence markers used were also included in the data.
To reveal the potential difference in narrativeness between writings by Chinese and NES authors, the means of normalized frequency counts of events, narrative sequences and sequence markers in the two groups of writings were compared with each other with the *t*-test applied. The crosstabs procedure was then used to analyze the possible difference in the patterns of verb tenses and sequence marker types between the two groups of writings with the significance of the results indicated by the Pearson *Chi*-square test.

What is given below is an illustration of how narrative features were identified and classified in an EFL sample and an NES sample at the initial stage of the analysis. The token E stands for an event and is followed by a number indicating its position in the text. Neither sample has been edited or revised, and errors remain unchanged.

**Sample career autobiography of a Chinese author:**


*E3* Since 1994 I have worked for China FAW Group Corporation Automotive Parts Company Ltd. Pump Branch Company. It is located in Liaoyuan.

*E4* After several months practical exercises, *E5* I begun to work as a designer of unstandard equipments. Usually the work takes me about three to six weeks. Of course, it depends on the complexity of the design. At first, I must give a sketch of the design, and discuss all the details about it with the relevant engineers from different departments. *E6* When we come to conclusion, *E7* then I begin to draw with CAD. *E8* After I finish my drawing, *E9* someone will send the drawings to the machining workshop, *E10* and begin machining the parts. *E10* When there are some mistakes or some changes in drawing are necessary during the machining process, *E11* I’ll be called to the workshop and improve the drawings. *E12* When all the parts and components are finished, *E13* I will go to the workshop and organize the workers to install. This phase is important, it decides whether the test station is in good condition or not. *E14* After the commissioning for a short time, *E15* the station will be transported to the correct position of the workshop. That is my job, which sometimes I like, *E16* and sometimes I’m tired of.

The results of the initial analysis of this EFL sample are summarized in the following charts (Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4) with other details provided (NS stands for narrative sequence; SM stands for sequence marker.).

As can be seen from the results, there are 16 events and 4 narrative sequences in this 250-word text. With a normalizing basis of 100, the normalized counts of the two features are 6.4 and 1.6 respectively.

**Table 1. Narrative Sequence 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NS</th>
<th>E2</th>
<th>E1</th>
<th>E3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SM</td>
<td>graduated; in 1994</td>
<td>At college,</td>
<td>Since 1994; have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb tense</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>present perfect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM type</td>
<td>verb; temporal adjunct</td>
<td>temporal adjunct</td>
<td>temporal adjunct; tense contrast</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample career autobiography of a NES author:

\textit{E1} I have been with the Financial Stability area of the Bank of England since 1993, which is responsible for the analysis of risk in the financial sector, payment and settlement systems, markets and market structures and the international monetary framework. In my role with this area, I'm responsible for increasing the area’s awareness of financial issues in Japan and North America. In order to fulfill this general responsibility, I specialize in undertaking research into key economic and financial questions relevant to these countries. Another responsibility on the post is to maintain and develop high-level contacts with businessmen, academics and central bankers. As one of the two Senior Advisers, \textit{E2} I’m also given regular opportunities to collaborate with highly qualified Bank of England staff on specific projects initiated to generate opinions and suggestions for the reference of the management.

As can be seen from the above analysis, there are 2 events in this NES sample. They do not constitute a narrative sequence because they are not temporally successive to each other. The normalized count of the two events in this 137-word sample is 1.46 with a normalizing basis of 100.

\section*{4. Results and Discussion}

Table 5 summarizes the differences between the 24 career autobiographies of Chinese
authors and the 21 career autobiographies of NES authors in the means of normalized frequency counts of events and narrative sequences and the means of the ratio of narrative sequences to events in individual articles. With the independent-sample t-test applied, it is found that Chinese authors make use of significantly more events \((p < 0.01)\) and narrative sequences \((p < 0.01)\) in their writings than NES authors. An average of 2.54 events and 0.67 narrative sequences per 100 words are put into the writings by Chinese authors in contrast with 1.63 and 0.39 in the writings by NES writers. However, it has also been shown that the ratios of narrative sequences to events do not vary significantly between Chinese and NES authors; in other words, the narrative sequences created by Chinese and NES authors are comparable in terms of the number of events included in them.

As these results indicate, the writings of Chinese authors demonstrate a significantly greater degree of narrativeness than that of NES authors’ compositions. Narrative sequences are used about twice as frequently in the writings of Chinese authors as in the writings of native speakers. The average normalized frequency counts of events in Chinese authors’ compositions are also far greater than that in NES authors’ writings.

Table 6 shows the percentages of events narrated in the past, present and future tenses in the writings of Chinese and NES authors. NES authors demonstrate a greater preference \((65.9\%)\) for the use of the present tense when narrating procedures while Chinese authors are more likely to use the past and future tenses \((31.2\% \text{ and } 19.9\%, \text{ respectively})\). The differences in these percentages are significant by a Chi-square test \((p < 0.05)\). The results show that Chinese authors are more likely to extend their narrative accounts into the past and the future, resulting in a more stretched and dynamic representation of their experience. Admittedly, the result may be partially attributed to the grammatical errors made by Chinese authors. However, it still seems to suggest that the writings of Chinese authors are more narrative than those of NES authors in the sense that the former writings cover a greater span of time and more often represent the world from the temporal perspective.

### Table 5. Means Comparison Between Chinese Authors’ and NES Authors’ Writings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Chinese authors</th>
<th>NES authors</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>2.54 ± 1.14</td>
<td>1.63 ± 0.65</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative sequences</td>
<td>0.67 ± 0.26</td>
<td>0.39 ± 0.30</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratios between narrative sequences and events</td>
<td>0.27 ± 0.08</td>
<td>0.21 ± 0.15</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 6. Frequency Counts of Events Narrated in Different Verb Tenses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Chinese authors</th>
<th>NES authors</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past/ Present perfect</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7 shows the distribution of sequence markers in three categories (temporal adjuncts or clauses, tense contrast, and verbs with temporal meanings) in the writings of Chinese and NES authors. Again, different patterns in these writings can be confirmed by the differences in the percentages which are significant by a Chi-square test ($p < 0.05$). It turns out that temporal adjuncts and clauses have gained greater favor with NES authors (74.4%) while Chinese authors are more likely to mark the sequentiality of narratives with tense contrast (27.7%) and verbal structures with temporal meanings (20.2%) than NES authors (12.8% and 12.8%, respectively). The greater percentages of events mentioned in the past and future tenses both contribute to the greater percentage of tense contrast. Again, this suggests the greater vibrancy of Chinese authors’ narratives. Similarly, the greater percentage and frequency of verbs with temporal meanings imply Chinese authors’ greater interest in temporality or narrativeness. In comparison with temporal adverbials and tense contrast, which are circumstantial and implicit evidence of narratives, predicates incorporating verbs with temporal meanings give clear lexical indication of the clauses as narrative statements. Evidence of narrativeness is moved from the background to the foreground in clauses with such predicates, suggesting a narrative motivation of the clause’s message. In the light of the results shown in Table 7, it can be argued again that Chinese authors’ writings have greater narrativeness than those of NES authors though this conclusion needs data on a larger scale in order to be convincing.

Table 7. Frequency Counts of Sequence Markers in Three Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Chinese authors</th>
<th>NES authors</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$p < 0.05$ (Chi-square test)

As the results have already shown, Chinese authors show a stronger tendency to weave narratives into their writings, and this is evident in the greater frequency of elements of narratives and the greater percentages of grammatical and lexical choices associated with narrativeness. This observation then begs the question of what is behind their motivation to tell tales. However, it is obviously beyond the scope of this study to find empirical evidence of what causes the Chinese authors to incorporate narrative discourse into their
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writings more often than the NES authors. Despite the difficulties, it can be speculated that there are at least three possible factors that are worth considering with regard to this divergence in narrativeness between Chinese authors’ EFL writings and NES writings.

To begin with, it is worthwhile to look into the relevance of Chinese authors’ EFL proficiency to their use of narratives when generating content for their writings. It has been a well established view that EFL authors with greater language proficiency tend to be more adept at generating content for their writings. Hyland (2003), for example, has confirmed the role of language proficiency in EFL writers’ use of strategies for content generating at the stage of planning. One may suspect that the lower proficiency in English compromises Chinese authors’ capacity to make use of a wide spectrum of content types and results in their dependence on narratives in their compositions. This hypothesis, of course, requires a separate study on the connection between the author’s EFL proficiency and the narrativeness of his EFL writings.

In addition, the greater narrativeness in the career autobiographies of Chinese authors may also reflect their lack of experience with this particular ESP genre; in other words, the intensive use of narrative discourse in Chinese authors’ career autobiographies may be ascribable to their lack of genre literacy. Hyland (2004) points out that EFL authors deviate from generic conventions because they have not been sufficiently exposed to the specific genre in both learning and job-related settings. This tenuous grip on generic conventions reflects the fact that these Chinese authors have rarely composed career autobiographies that are included in an English job application. It is then possible to argue that these authors may have depended on their schemas for Chinese autobiographies when they do not have reliable schemas for the ESP genre. Again, a study that systematically compares Chinese and English career autobiographies is needed to confirm this argument.

Finally, there still remains the question of whether the tendency for Chinese authors to include more narratives in their English writings can be attributed to their predispositions regarding the representation of thoughts in writings. Some previous researches have confirmed positive relationships between cognitive styles and the performances of EFL learners in both comprehension and production (Johnson, Prior & Artuso, 2000; Williams, 1985). Carrel and Monroe (1993) have established correlations between EFL writers’ cognitive preferences and the amount of content they generate for a writing topic, and the researchers claim that this shows the possible relevance of cognitive preferences to the author’s use of strategies for content generation. What draws our attention, in particular, is the possible connection between the field dependent (FD) cognitive style and narrativeness.

FD individuals have been reported to less often abstract critical elements out of their context and restructure them in alternative ways (Witkin, Moore, Goodenough & Cox, 1977). It is then reasonable to believe that this tendency towards the fusion of familiar experiences and abstract observations favors the use of narrative discourse. Currie (2006) points out that narrative is distinctive from other discursive options because its peculiar form of representation focuses on a global picture in which particulars are not sorted out or stratified, rather than on a structured world with details fitted into complex relationships. These particulars—events and happenings—which constitute a
great percentage of people’s raw experiences, serve to be the field from which people’s restructured world arises in the form of hierarchies and contrasts. Narrative discourse, thus, might reflect the author’s FD representation of the world in which structures and relationships are not sufficiently extracted from the field. In the case of this study, it might be argued that the greater narrativeness of the EFL writings by Chinese authors suggests their FD cognitive style.

However, whether Chinese authors can be described as thinking in a characteristically field dependent manner remains highly controversial. While some (Gollnik & Chinn, 1994; Jahoda, 1982) support such a claim, other even doubt the validity of using the FD/FI contrast to describe and measure individuals from a certain culture. For example, Zhang (2004) argues that the FD/FI construct represents perceptual ability rather than a broad cognitive style and cannot be used in any sweeping statement that tries to predict the behaviors of members of any culture. Therefore, although very attractive, the speculation that Chinese authors use narrative discourse more extensively because of their FD cognitive style remains unconfirmed and requires more extensive research.

5. Conclusions

This study shows that Chinese authors are more likely to incorporate elements of narrative discourses into their English career autobiographies than NES authors. It shows a greater frequency with which events and narrative sequences appear in Chinese authors’ English career autobiographies than in NES authors’ career autobiographies. It has also identified patterns of verb tenses and sequence markers in these writings that contribute to the scope and progression of narrative discourse. To sum up, these findings suggest the greater narrativeness of Chinese authors’ English writings.

It is suggested that the possible excessive use of narrative discourse in Chinese students’ English writings merits the attention of EFL teachers. Teachers should sensitize their students to the existence of narrative elements in writings and the potential difference in the pervasiveness of such elements between EFL and NES writings. A close examination of the narrativeness of genres such as career autobiographies can improve the students’ grasp of the generic constraints on content and align their use of content with the purpose of the genre.

A further pedagogical implication of the study is that Chinese students should be made aware of their use of strategies for generating and elaborating content in their writings and that English teachers should assist them in understanding alternative writing strategies in the initial stages of writings. Most teachers do have a good knowledge of their students’ lack of ability to achieve coherence through the use of cohesive and transitional devices, but unfortunately, there has been little discussion over whether Chinese students may have specific intuition about what content can be taken as appropriate under certain circumstances. Since this study has discovered differences between Chinese and NES authors in terms of the content of their writings, it is worthwhile to revise our teaching of English writing to Chinese students to ensure that they are better equipped to monitor
their strategies for content generation. Then they can be more confident and comfortable when facing the essential question that every writer asks: what can I talk about in my writing?

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