Fostering Professional Inquiry: A Report on the Sixth National Symposium on EFL Writing Research and Teaching in China

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Abstract
This report presents an overall picture of the state of research and recent highlights of English writing in China by describing the Sixth National Symposium on EFL Writing Research and Teaching in China, which was held in Beijing in fall 2008. Major themes emerging from the symposium are grouped into five categories: (1) The state-of-the-art of L2 writing research at home and abroad; (2) Writing instruction; (3) Student writers and China English; (4) Evaluation and assessment; and (5) Professional development of L2 writing teachers. The report concludes with an analysis of the trends of EFL writing in China based on conference discussions.

Key words: English; L2 writing; the Chinese context

1. Introduction
The Sixth National Symposium on EFL Writing Research and Teaching in China was held in Beijing between September 26 and 27, 2008. Hosted by Beijing Normal University, this symposium attracted approximately 130 participants from China, North America, and Australia. The theme of the Symposium was “EFL Writing: Teaching and Researching as a Profession”. The two-day program revealed that the Chinese EFL writing community has emerged as a professional group by gathering more and more researchers, scholars and teachers who commit themselves to English writing research and instruction. These professionals further inquired such much-discussed issues as pedagogy, student writers and their writing products in the Chinese context, expanded the scope of study by adding more issues, for example, China English and writing teacher development, to their
research agenda, and further reached out by inviting more international colleagues to the Symposium.

A look at the history of the writing symposium may offer a glimpse into how the field of English language writing has grown in recent years in China. The first symposium was held in 2003 at Guangdong Foreign Language and Trade University in an effort to tackle the thorny issue of ineffective instruction in English writing in China. The theme of that symposium was “Write to Learn”, and the main discussion centered on an indigenously developed instructional approach called the Length Approach, proposed by Professor Wang Chuming at the host university. This approach in its earliest version resembles free writing, encouraging students to write long compositions on topics of interest, which in turn boosts their confidence and skills in writing and eventually promotes their general English competence (Wang, 2005). A very important achievement of the first Symposium was the consensus reached by the participants that a professional conference should be organized regularly to explore writing pedagogy appropriate to the Chinese context, to collaborate and exchange ideas and experiences among colleagues, and to promote the role of writing in ELT in China. Hence the writing symposium becomes an annual event for English writing teachers and researchers across the country. With the efforts of the past five conferences, now the writing symposium has expanded from a small gathering of concerned Chinese ELT professionals to a large event with participants from diverse contexts seeking insights from one another, and the topics of discussion have moved far beyond writing pedagogy to encompass various topics of interest in English language writing, as reflected by the list of the past conferences in Table 1.

**Table 1. Past Symposia on EFL Writing Research and Teaching in China**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Year and Location</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Focus</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2003 Guangzhou</td>
<td>Write to Learn</td>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2004 Xi’an</td>
<td>New Concepts and Approaches of English Language Writing Instruction in the New Millennium</td>
<td>New developments in writing instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2005 Wuhan</td>
<td>Diversity and Innovation—EFL Writing and Career Development</td>
<td>Innovation in the context of diversity</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2006 Beijing</td>
<td>English Writing for Cross-cultural Communication</td>
<td>Intercultural communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2007 Guiyang</td>
<td>Teaching and Researching EFL Writing Across Curriculum</td>
<td>Meeting the writing needs of different learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2008 Beijing</td>
<td>EFL Writing: Teaching and Research as a Profession</td>
<td>Professional inquiry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Sixth Symposium featured 5 plenary lectures and over 60 concurrent session presentations, which addressed a wide range of issues in the field of second language writing. The following is a summary of the major topics of the presentations based on a content analysis of the Conference Program and Abstracts as well as the authors’ observation of the discussions and activities during the conference.
2. Major Themes

2.1 The State of the Art of L2 Writing Research
The Symposium had a most impressive collection of plenary speakers from both home and abroad. Three internationally leading experts, Tony Silva, Ilona Leki and Alister Cumming, provided the Chinese participants with an overview of the scholarship in L2 writing field internationally. Tony Silva opened the symposium with an elaborate presentation on the development of second language writing as a professional discipline. He traced the development of the field since the 1950s and identified main research interests in each decade, offering an assessment of the current status of the field as well as speculations about its future. Ilona Leki presented a thematic analysis of the various contexts for L2 writing in North America, ranging from K-12 schools, undergraduate and graduate contexts, to academic, scholarly or professional context. Alister Cumming discussed some trends in L2 writing research and pedagogy. His talk prompted the audience to think about the principles and trends informing curriculum, teaching and assessment in L2 writing. A more thorough synthesis of the development of the field is available in a recent volume by the three scholars (Leki, Cumming & Silva, 2008), which can serve as a key reference for researchers working in L2 writing and related fields.

In comparison with the international perspective provided by the Western scholars, the plenary talks by two Chinese scholars, Wen Qiufang and Wu Zunmin, focused on issues of EFL writing in the Chinese context. Wen Qiufang explored the register features of Chinese learners of English by summarizing the findings of four relevant studies based on learner corpus. She found that Chinese learners’ English shows clear register differences across speech and writing, but these differences are not the same as those demonstrated by native speakers of English. Wen’s synthesis provides insights into Chinese EFL learners’ interlanguage development and has possible implications for English teaching to Chinese learners. The talk by Wu Zunmin reported a needs analysis study of the writing curriculum development for college English majors. She found that the students have a keen need to develop writing skills in order to prepare for high-stake English examinations and future career development, but the current English writing curriculum cannot satisfy their diverse needs. The study calls for a systematic reconstruction of the writing curriculum to expand the length of writing instruction and to provide diverse instruction starting from general writing skills training and moving on to advanced writing such as critical writing and writing for specific purposes. The findings of this large-scale study have implications for the design of EFL writing curriculum and make a convincing case for the teaching of writing, which has received less attention in recent years than listening and speaking in many English classes nationwide (Zhang, 2008; Zhang, 2006).

2.2 Writing Instruction
The most prominent topic of the conference, as always in China’s EFL writing field, is the exploration of effective EFL writing pedagogy. In the past, discussions on effective EFL writing pedagogy tended to be dominated by personal experiences and opinion pieces (Wang & Wang, 2004; Yao & Cheng, 2005). This symposium, however, saw a large percentage of
relevant studies based on empirical research. Several presentations examined the applicability and validity of Western approaches in the Chinese context, such as the process approach, the genre approach, and task-based instruction. For example, Liang Wenhua compared the writing performance of two classes of students, one class using the genre approach while the other the product approach. She found that the genre approach enabled students to make much more progress in writing than the product approach. In a similar vein, Li Liwen compared the writings of university English majors before and after the implementation of a process-based writing approach. She found that the process approach helped students improve their writing proficiency, and students made more progress in content, organization, style and overall rating than in language, suggesting that the process approach is more effective in helping students improve some areas of writing than others.

Alongside experimenting with Western approaches, Chinese EFL writing teachers also proposed several instructional approaches specially tailored to the characteristics and writing problems of Chinese students. The Length Approach, which was the focus of the first writing symposium, was brought up again at the sixth symposium, where Zheng Chao reviewed the successful reform efforts using this approach. Over the years, the Length Approach has been greatly enriched to include many elements of Western instructional approaches, such as the process approach and task-based instruction, in order to cater to the needs of students at different proficiency levels. The integration of different approaches reflects a trend that Chinese scholars are moving beyond the stage of striving to find the single best approach to teaching writing since there is no one-size-fits-all method. Instead, they have been exploring the modification, combination and integration of both Western and Chinese instructional approaches, which may help to maximize students’ writing development. For instance, one of the presenters, Pang Hui, talked about an ongoing research project which adopted a flexible approach to teaching writing based on students’ English proficiency and learning needs. In his study, the focus of writing instruction to college freshmen was to arouse their interest in writing using the Length Approach and the process approach, whereas for the sophomores who were preparing for the College English Test, they were taught mainly through the product approach which emphasizes the use of model texts and discourse strategies.

How to teach academic writing also drew increasing attention because of the demand for students to write academic papers in English (Xiong & Yin, 2009). To cope with the challenging task of preparing students for academic writing in English, writing instructors have been experimenting with various approaches. Ji Kangli reported an integrated approach to teaching academic writing by drawing students’ attention to the linkage between argumentative essays and research papers. Since students were familiar with the conventions of argumentative essays, they soon learned how to write research papers based on this scaffolding and made remarkable progress in academic writing.

Apart from discussions on pedagogical approaches, a number of presentations dealt with various forms of feedback strategies. Research on feedback has been a hot issue for several years in the international community and still is nowadays (Qi, 2004; Wang, 2007). But the sudden surge of interest in feedback study in China is a recent phenomenon. Teacher feedback, as the main feedback practice in China, was examined from different
perspectives including the nature of teacher written feedback, the use of error feedback by Chinese EFL writing teachers, the long-term effect of teacher feedback on student writers’ development, the impact of different types of teacher feedback on student revision, and students’ response to teacher feedback. The discussion on peer feedback was equally heated because it complements the traditional time consuming, sometimes less than satisfactory practice of teacher feedback. Not to mention its potential as a feasible solution to improve English writing instruction in China, which has been plagued by problems such as large class size, limited time, shortage of writing teachers, and lack of student collaboration (You, 2004). The presentations on peer feedback revealed that Chinese students’ attitude toward peer feedback was influenced by a number of factors, such as the mode of feedback (e.g. oral or written), student characteristics (e.g. English or non-English majors), length of exposure to this practice, and student training (training students to make the best use of peer feedback). But generally speaking, if the peer feedback process is implemented carefully, students tend to have a positive perception of it, which is contradictory to some previous studies suggesting that peer feedback might not be very effective with Chinese EFL learners due to cultural influences (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Fei, 2006). As Chinese professionals strive to find effective ways to enhance EFL students’ writing competence in English, feedback strategies will continue to be an important part of discussion in the Chinese EFL writing field.

2.3 Student Writers and China English

Research on student writers received much more attention than in previous years, reflecting the recent shift from teacher centeredness to student centeredness in the research of EFL writing in China. In addition to the aforementioned plenary presentations by Chinese scholars which discussed some aspects of Chinese EFL student writers and their writing, several concurrent presentations also addressed various aspects related to L2 writers, such as Chinese students’ writing needs, writing process, strategies and typical problems, the relationship between Chinese students’ EFL writing and thinking, the text features of Chinese students’ EFL writing, and the influence of L1 on their L2 writing development.

A strong focus of these presentations was on the cognitive development of student writers. Xu Fang studied the lexical-problem-solving mechanisms of six English majors in their writing process in order to uncover the complex process of L2 problem-solving text-generation of Chinese EFL writers. Wang Na’s study, which compared the strategy use of English and non-English majors in their writing process, revealed some differences in the strategy use of these two distinct groups of EFL learners, offering important implications for effective writing instruction based on specific learner backgrounds. Wan Jiran’s study took a close look at students’ strategic competence displayed during the writing process and identified the moderating factors affecting the strategic competence of the participants.

It is worth noting that several studies utilized learner corpus data. Chinese scholars have developed several learner corpora, such as Chinese Learners’ English Corpus (CLEC) (Gui & Yang, 2003) and Spoken and Written English Corpus of Chinese Learners (SWECLCL)
(Wen, Wang & Liang, 2005). This symposium witnessed an increasing use of the corpus-based approach in studying the text features and writing problems of Chinese EFL writers in diverse contexts. For example, Huang Youqi studied features of the title of English articles written by Chinese medical professionals based on two corpora, identifying some distinct text features in writings by Chinese EFL learners. Zhang Xuemei and Yang Yingying analyzed the tense errors in university English majors’ test essay writing using the Corpus for English Majors (CEM). Judging from the increasing number of studies employing learner corpus data at this symposium as well as in recent publications, a corpus-based approach to EFL writing will probably play an even bigger role in future research.

The discussion of China English also stirred a good deal of interest. You Xiaoye from Pennsylvania State University studied the rhetorical strategies used in China English by focusing on an online bulletin-board forum. He divided the discussion threads into four sets of contexts and found that the specific context of situation had a great influence on the rhetorical strategies used by its members, which defies the popular inference model which tends to predict discursive strategies of China English based on Chinese discourse and cultural features. You’s study of China English drew upon his background in rhetoric and composition theories, demonstrating the potential of interdisciplinary inquiry in EFL writing research. In addition to describing China English, the implication of world Englishes for writing instruction was also explored at the symposium. A survey study by Xing Jianyu and his colleagues reported the perception of Chinese-style English by native and non-native speakers of English, suggesting a reconceptualization of the teaching of English writing in a global context where features of World Englishes have been increasingly recognized.

2.4 Evaluation and Assessment

Evaluation and assessment are of vital importance to effective EFL writing instruction, but have not been adequately addressed in China. Few presentations on evaluation and assessment were found in previous symposiums but an entire session was devoted to the topic at this Symposium, indicating an emerging interest in this area. Issues of scorer training, automated scoring, peer assessment, and self-evaluation were discussed. Many studies reported involved high-stakes national English tests in China, such as the Test for English Majors (TEM) and the College English Test (CET). This kind of English level test has grown rapidly in recent years due to the importance of English proficiency attached to better jobs and development opportunities. Just take the CET for an example. When it was first given in 1987, only 100,000 students took the test. Two decades later, the number of test takers went up to around 10 million each year. As this kind of test bears great importance for the students and has significant washback effects on writing instruction (Jin, 2008), it came as no surprise to see a surge of interest in this area. At this session of the symposium, in addition to exploring various methods to evaluate the English writing of Chinese learners, some efforts were also devoted to helping students better prepare for these high-stakes English tests. For instance, Zhou Yiyi based on his years of training students for the CET found that students tended to use very simple time expressions in describing graphs, so he designed tutorials to help them learn how to use a variety of expressions to describe time, change and tendency. His project was successful in that students showed improvement in
this kind of writing, but further questions also arose during the process. For example, what if students made some grammatical errors when stepping out of their comfort zone to try out new ways of expressing time? How would this bold behavior affect their score? Should we encourage students to write simple but safe essays or should we aim for complicated but less safe writing? Should we pay more attention to the language features or to ideas and creativity? Given the huge number of test takers and the far-reaching effects of large scale national college English tests in China, issues in evaluation and assessment will undoubtedly draw increasing attention in the future.

2.5 Professional Development of L2 Writing Teachers

For decades EFL writing research in China has focused on effective pedagogy, the students, and their written texts, largely overlooking the role and development of EFL writing teachers. At this symposium, the issue of writing teacher development was addressed by several presentations and subsequent discussions. Razika Sanaoui from York University, Canada presented an online professional development community project, identifying several issues in training teachers to teach reading and writing. This report from the Canadian context was echoed by a study of Chinese EFL teachers’ beliefs and practices in teaching writing by Yang Luxin and Gao Shaofen, who developed a theoretical framework to account for the instructional practices of the participating teachers in the study. In this framework, five categories—prior knowledge, attitudes, instructional goals, approaches to feedback, and teachers’ personas—were identified to explain the writing teachers’ classroom practices. Similarly, another Chinese presenter Zhang Peixin explored the relationship between the beliefs and classroom practices of two EFL writing teachers at university, finding that many of the participants’ beliefs about writing instruction could not be implemented in their actual teaching. The influencing factors included conflicts between the beliefs of the teachers and the levels and needs of the students, institutional constraints such as large class size, limited class time and fast teaching pace, and pressure from various examinations. These presentations sparked heated discussions on writing teacher development. The participants agreed that the professional development of EFL writing teachers is highly necessary, and many voiced the concern that currently little professional support is available to pre-service and in-service teachers to help them teach writing in English, which partly explains the fact that writing remains a neglected area in ELT in China. Fortunately, the lively discussion at this symposium seemed to suggest that research on the professional development of writing teachers is attracting increasing attention and could be a new direction in EFL writing research.

3. Trends of EFL Writing in China

Several trends in research on EFL writing in China can be identified by examining the conference program in comparison with previous ones and current literature. First, the subject of study has expanded in scope and depth, as illustrated by the above descriptions of main conference topics. The traditional focus on writing pedagogy has been complemented by extensive study on the writing process, strategies and text features of EFL students, and
current topics of international interests have also been addressed by Chinese colleagues such as evaluation and assessment, World Englishes, and writing teacher development. Second, the contexts ranged from high schools to vocational schools and universities, from the training of English majors to that of non-English majors, from academic to scholarly and professional writing, and EFL writers at different levels are examined. Findings of studies from these different contexts can help us achieve a more thorough and systematic understanding of the complexity of EFL writing instruction in China. Thirdly, research methods have become more rigorous and diverse. Empirical studies have largely replaced opinion pieces which tended to dominate previous writing symposiums and a large part of the existing literature in the field. Mixed method research which combines qualitative and quantitative design seems to be welcomed by Chinese scholars. All the above mentioned features show that EFL writing in China has undergone substantial development in the past years and will continue to grow as Chinese and international scholars in the field share experiences and expertise to enhance the writing competence of L2 learners.

References


