Issues that Affect Chinese EFL Students'Academic Writing Ability

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Abstract

Chinese tertiary students frequently perform poorly in English academic writing.This study, using the literature review method, investigated factors that influence Chinese EFL students'academic writing ability from two aspects:discourse competence and metacognition awareness. The result shows that, on the one hand, Chinese EFL students' academic writing competence is limited by a lack of explicit guidance on general academic practical skills and by the impediment of linguistic problems; on the other hand, they performed poorly in academic writing due to their lack of critical thinking ability and the recognition of writer identity. Two concerns are interrelated. Some pedagogical implications and suggestions are further provided.

Keywords

English Academic Writing; Chinese EFL Students; Writing Challenges.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Background of the Study

English academic writing is critical for communication in academia worldwide and provides a competitive edge for individuals pursuing post-secondary education. Despite its importance, English academic writing in Chinese education is yet to be adequately emphasized. According to Sun's questionnaire (2004), only 16% of 52 colleges and universities surveyed offered academic writing courses to MA (Master of Arts) students majoring in English, and 15% of 147 students surveyed reported never having been exposed to academic writing courses during their undergraduate years. It might be assumed that the situation is significantly worse for students who do not major in English.The reality is that the majority of Chinese college English education is still centered on EGP (English for General Purposes) rather than EAP (English for Academic Purposes) (Cai, 2013). Therefore, Chinese tertiary students require urgent education in academic writing. Given the enormous disparity between the L1 and L2 (Chinese and English), it is both logical and necessary to investigate the variables that restrict academic writing in order to improve pedagogical practice. This article, therefore, aims to investigate the most important factors that influence Chinese EFL Students' academic writing ability.

1.2. Aims of the Study

The study will investigate the following questions:

1)What are the main difficulties Chinese EFL students encounter in academic writing?

2)What is the correlation between the difficulties?

3)How can Chinese teachers help learners overcome the difficulties in future academic writing instructions?

2. Discussion

2.1. Issues that Affect Chinese EFL Students' English Academic Writing

Having studied the international and domestic literature on Chinese learners' academic writing issues, the author has found two major reasons that affect Chinese EFL students' writing:

discourse competence and metacognition awareness. For the purpose of providing better academic writing training to Chinese learners, the study will summarize and elucidate specifically what these factors are and how they cause the difficulties in Chinese EFL academic writing.

2.2.   Discourse Competence

Discourse competence is a plurilingual ability that entails the ability to manage sociocultural, pragmatic, and textual knowledge (concepts and skills) effectively, appropriately, and critically when producing and interpreting any particular discourse genre in relation to the genre colony to which it belongs.

2.3.   Pragmatic Knowledge

Jenny Thomas (1983) defined pragmatic knowledge as "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand a language in context." Accordingly, pragmatic knowledge can be seen as the ability and skills to deliver meanings in context effectively. Being equipped with pragmatic knowledge is a necessity for successful academic research or study. According to Huang and Brown (2009), Chinese graduate students studying in North American universities, however, have a difficult time coping with academic writing due to their general lack of pragmatic academic abilities. Cai, in 2013, conducted a small-scale study at a renowned university in Southern China using a questionnaire and a focus group interview to ascertain the academic writing demands of Chinese postgraduates. The interviewees were selected from a pool of fifty first-year postgraduate students.They each held a bachelor's degree from a separate university. This research was motivated by the MA students' assessment of the importance of academic writing, the difficulty of academic writing, and their attitude toward previous academic writing courses. Not surprisingly, the data suggests that more than half of the students surveyed (70%) had never taken an academic writing course before. According to Cai, some participants commented that, aside from the format and framework, they had received little systematic instruction in academic writing. They were forced to replicate model research papers published in periodicals. Even for people who already knew how to write academically, complaints and unhappiness were the only thing that made the class a "success."

Table 1. 1 & 2, cited in Cai, 2013

(1)

Means of Perceived Difficulty of Academic Writing Skills

Items		Mean (difficulty)	SD
General academic writing skills (M = 3.42)	Writing introductions	2.83	0.96
	Searching for appropriate literature using databases and library resources	3.53	0.85
	Referring to sources	3.28	0.82
	Reviewing and critiquing the previous research and creating a research space (gap)	4.30	0.88
	Designing the research methods	4.08	0.69
	Writing the methods section	3.74	0.88
	Summarizing and presenting the data	3.53	0.91
	Commentaries and discussions on the data	3.85	0.74
	Writing references / bibliography	2.38	0.90
	Writing conclusions	3.10	0.79
	Proofreading written assignments	3.08	0.96

(2)

The Frequency of Academic Writing Skills Taught in Previous Academic Writing Courses

Items		Mean (frequency)	SD
General academic writing skills (M = 2.78)	Writing introductions	3.36	1.34
	Searching for appropriate literature using databases and library resources	2.57	1.28
	Referring to sources	2.79	1.12
	Reviewing and critiquing the previous research and creating a research space (gap)	2.93	1.33
	Designing the research methods	2.36	1.39
	Writing the methods section	2.21	1.25
	Summarizing and presenting the data	2.86	1.29
	Commentaries and discussions on the data	2.71	1.14
	Writing references / bibliography	2.93	1.27
	Writing conclusions	3.31	1.25
	Proofreading written assignments	2.50	1.09

Another valuable finding is that those pragmatic writing skills that students had difficulty with were precisely those that had been less frequently taught by teachers. According to Cai's research, the three most difficult academic writing abilities for students polled were evaluating,

critiquing past research, and generating a research space (gap) (M = 4.30 out of 5), devising research methodologies (M = 4.08), and commentaries and discussions on the findings (M = 3.85). In comparison, the average frequency of instruction for these three most challenging skills was just M = 2.93, M = 2.36, and M = 2.71. Teachers' emphasis on the opening (M = 3.36) and conclusion (M = 3.31) was far from sufficient when it came to teaching academic writing.

Most Chinese students begin learning English in primary school, but this long period of study does not necessarily imply that they have sufficient access to writing instruction, which is a potentially overlooked factor. The writing section of the National College Entrance Examination requires students to write approximately 10 sentences and accounts for approximately 16% of the total score.Even though most institutions provide the necessary course "College English," language instruction is still exam-oriented because students must pass a standardized national assessment known as the College English Test (CET). This test only examines students' receptive skills, not productive skills (Gu & Liu, 2005). In addition, because writing proficiency accounts for only 15% of the total score, it is overlooked. In Chinese secondary schools and universities, the primary methods of studying and teaching English writing are memorization and imitation. Given the disparity between the teaching effect of English writing at the intermediate level and the rigorous demands of academic writing at the advanced level, specific skill instruction is the first step for students to succeed in academic writing. As a result, the first problem with Chinese EFL students' academic writing is that they don't get enough structured help on how to write about real-life situations.

2.4. Linguistic Knowledge

Apart from general writing skills, linguistic knowledge, such as syntactic and lexical language knowledge, is another factor affecting Chinese EFL students' academic writing. The first problem comes from the contrast between the emphasis on grammar correctness and the lack of attention to grammar appropriateness.Chinese language teachers still prefer to regard grammar as a set of rules, and the traditional Presentation (mainly in the L1)-Practice-Production teaching method is still the mainstream. Students are, however, expected to use their grammatical knowledge not just at the sub-sentential and sentential levels, but also, and more crucially, at the supra-sentential level when writing. Thus, the focus shifts from the precision of forms to the suitability of context or discourse environment, making grammar a resource for making meaning. The gap between Chinese students' understanding of grammatical structures and their ability to express themselves in writing is caused by a lack of access to contextualized grammar instruction. Take A Corpus-based Study of Modal Verbs in Chinese Learners' Academic Writing by Yang (2018) as an example. Because of the extreme significance of modality in academic writing, it is worthwhile to examine the way Chinese EFL students' use modal verbs. One of the findings of Yang's research is that Chinese students' overuse of modal verbs is possibly related to how they are taught in class. Yang takes should as an example. This modal verb suggests obligation in a comparatively weaker tone in English, but it is merely equivalent to 应该 in Chinese, indicating either necessity or suggestion. If the use of should is taught in a way detached from the real context and the only focus is on its grammatical function in a sentence, the overuse or even the misuse of should is moderately inevitable. Wei and Lei (2011) examined the differences in the use of lexical bundles between advanced and professional writers using a self-created corpus of doctoral dissertations and published pieces by professional writers. The findings suggested that: 1) PhD writers preferred to utilize lexical bundles and a variety of lexical bundles over professional authors; and 2) both groups used an equal number of prepositional phrases, noun phrases, and be + noun/adjectival phrases. 3).Doctors tended to use more passive and less anticipatory bundle structures than professional writers.

The second issue in pragmatic knowledge is the negative transfer of the L1 to the L2 academic writing. First language transmission has been a problematic issue for decades, and its value has been regularly re-evaluated. Tracing back to the early research in this field, Lado (1957, cited in Karim and Nassaji, 2013) proposed the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) to examine the influence of the L1 on the L2 learning, and this hypothesis endows similarities and differences between the L1 and the L2 with predictive power. However, this early view of the L1 transfer was strongly opposed by many scholars. For example, Chomsky (1965, cited in Karim and Nassaji, 2013) argued it is an inherent ability to learn a language, which makes language acquisition uncorrelated with external factors. With the corrective movement of the L1 transfer theory, Selinker (1983, cited in Karim and Nassaji, 2013), categorized the transfer into positive and negative transfers. The former indicates the facilitating effect of the L1 knowledge on the L2 acquisition, while the latter refers to the interference of the L1 on the L2. Conflicts also exist in the L1 transfer in L2 writing.Many surveys, according to Karim and Nassaji (2013), have revealed similarities between L1-L2 writing strategies, and the use of L1 translation may also be conducive to L2 writing.Despite this, L2 proficiency may still act as a bridge, as lower proficiency writers may struggle to transfer L1-based skills easily and successfully.

Notwithstanding those contradictory views in the L1 transfer, this paper speculates the negative transfer of syntactic and lexical knowledge poses an obstacle in Chinese EFL students' academic writing. According to the research aimed at analyzing Chinese graduate students' written errors in UK universities by Bond (2016), the two main errors are articles used and plurals (table 3), covering approximately half of all the written errors. Even though these two errors may not cause serious comprehension problems, their frequent occurrence may still irritate the stringency of academic writing. Due to the negative morphemic transfer, Chinese students may make errors in the adding of the suffix -s or -es to form plurals owing to the negative morphemic transfer; they may also have difficulty in using articles in English due to the negative syntactical transfer (Li, 2007, cited in Bond, 2016). As Chinese EFL students get accustomed to the linguistic features of Chinese syntax, it is understandable that their writing is influenced by their L1 grammatical structures (Bumgarner, 2016). Errors in collocation also illustrate the lexical interference of the L1. Specifically, 学习知识 (acquiring knowledge) is an appropriate collocation in Chinese, while learning knowledge is not acceptable in English. Another typical illustration is that many Chinese students fail to distinguish between "improve," "increase, "enhance, " "elevate" etc. because all of them can be translated into 提升，提高 in Chinese.

Friedlander (1987, as cited in Kroll, 1990) believes that writers will transfer both their superior and inferior writing abilities and methods from their L1 to their L2. The detrimental effect on syntactic and lexical usage in academic writing cannot be overstated. Perhaps more studies should be done to see how important negative L1 interference is for different L2 academic writing skills in the future.

2.5. Metacognition Awareness

Wardle defines metacognition awareness in writing as "analyze assignments, see similarities and differences across assignments, discern what was being required of them, and determine what they needed to do in response."(76-77). Research evidence has shown that cognition and language development are closely related (Liaw, 2007). Therefore, this part chiefly clarifies the influence of Chinese EFL students' patterns of metacognition awareness on their academic writing, and specific attention is paid to critical thinking ability and writer identity.

2.6.　Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the ability to think clearly and logically about what to do or what to believe in the face of ambiguity or uncertainty. Halpern (1998) asserts that critical thinking is a byproduct of metacognition—the practice of certain metacognitive abilities such as monitoring one's own thought processes, checking progress, assuring accuracy, and making decisions (p. 453) Students' abilities to analyze issues, propose assumptions, perceive relationships, make inferences, evaluate evidence, and deduce conclusions (Tsui, 2002) via the process of producing an argument in an essay or a dissertation appear to be manifested by their abilities to analyze issues, propose assumptions, perceive relations, make inferences, evaluate evidence, and deduce conclusions (Tsui, 2002, Vyncke, 2012). Despite the fact that critical thinking is a contentious topic, its importance has been largely recognized by numerous academics. For example, Tapper (2004) says that critical thinking is one of the most important things that students learn in college, and employers prefer graduates who can apply this skill in the workplace.

Despite the fact that critical thinking is required for academic writing, it is often said that Chinese students don't have the critical thinking skills that are required at Western colleges.(Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Ellwood, 2000; Lee & Carrasquillo, 2006; Davies, 2013, cited in Rear, 2017). While the absence of critical thinking among Chinese students is not entirely warranted, it does have an effect on their academic writing. As stated by Kaplan (1966) , rhetoric is invisibly rooted in one's mind and is characterized by culture. Influenced by the Anglo-European culture, English native users' writing is linear, direct, analytic, and objective. By contrast, influenced by Confucian philosophy, Chinese EFL students' argumentative writing approaches the argument in a circular, indirect, non-assertive, but authoritative way. If the cultural caricature and sense of cultural superiority are excluded, these cognitive models are conducive to illuminating the influence of rhetorical differences in Chinese EFL students' academic writing. Under the influence of rhetoric patterns, Chinese people tend to be synthetic, image-based, subjective, group-oriented, non-systematic and respectful. On the contrary, as a unique writing type, in addition to language issues, academic writing requires "logic, objectivity, professionalism, purposefulness, structure, and expressiveness" (Xu, 2012).As a result, there is a gap in Chinese EFL students' thinking, which makes it hard for them to write academically.

2.7.　Writer Identity

Writer Identity refers to a writer's inner image of self, identity, and roots. Writer identity should be highlighted in English academic writing in an EFL context because the focus on writer identity enables L2 writing researchers to investigate topics such as unequal power relations between native and non-native English speakers, sociopolitical and disciplinary preferences for particular genres, and textual practices. (Hyland, 2002).

One of the findings from An Investigation of Chinese University EFL Learners' Knowledge about Writing by Liu (2010) is to explore Chinese students' audience awareness. The result is that among the 25 participants (all from Chinese university English majors), 60% of them subconsciously took raters or course teachers as their readers. Although the majority of interviewees confirmed the importance of the audience on the writing process and indicated that they would tailor their writing for different audiences, the default "teacher-as-reader" had impeded their thinking and writing. Although this is not an investigation directly inquiring into Chinese EFL students' writer identity in academic writing, the knowledge of the audience presumably has a reflection on the identification of the writer given the reciprocal relations between these two elements. Future research will also be conducted to explicitly examine Chinese EFL students' writer identity in academic writing.

As for the interrelation between writing and the writer's identity, Ivanič (1998, p.32) declared that "writing is an act of identity in which people align themselves with socio-culturally shaped

subject possibilities for self-hood, playing their part in reproducing or challenging dominant practices and discourses, and the values, beliefs, and interests that they embody." Many Chinese EFL students' uncertainty and frustration with academic writing in English might be related to their failure to build an appropriate writer identity, because the academic discourse community, like any other, wants its members to be moulded with a specific identity. As a result, in order for EFL students to join the English academic discourse community, they must first establish their author identity. Besides, Chinese learners usually ignore "who they are" in writing due to the rooted influence of collectivism and Confucian cultural values. . (Zhao, H., Y., & Lin, X., 2013)They emphasized "we" instead of the personalized subjects like " the author" and " the study" when the work is done by an individual. .

Other studies also probe whether the writer identity facilitates critical thinking. McKinley (2015) contends that the "awareness of the sociocultural conventions of academic discourse" stimulates the critical thinking processes and "a writer identity aligned with the culture of English academic writing" also generates critical thinking. He proposed and explained an original analytical framework for EFL writing as a holistic model, demonstrating the inextricable linkages between sociocultural creation, identity building, and critical argument. In addition to the specified "individual psychology," a learner develops awareness of all aspects of a primary movement dubbed "group dynamics," which is underpinned by constructive theory and the literacy process. The learner is also influenced by the cultural setting and the intercultural challenge. The term "cultural context" refers to cultural activities that are embedded within academic obstacles. Additionally, the introduction of EFL poses an intercultural problem for students. Mckinley (2012, cited in Mckinley, 2015) further demonstrates the framework's application through a comparative investigation of two Japanese students' divergent experiences writing an argumentative research paper. One concern is that an overwhelming majority of Chinese EFL students are undergoing the dilemma that Aya (one of the two subjects in Mckinley's study) experienced. Similar to Aya, in the process of writing arguments, without the support of a cross-cultural background, Chinese students only struggle to find ways to negotiate with peers and are barely able to argue critically about the topic.

2.8. The Relationship between Discourse Competence and Metacognitive Awareness

As has been elucidated at the beginning of this paper, these two factors (discourse competence and metacognition awareness) are inextricably linked. One example of how these two aspects interact is that a lack of teaching on general writing abilities may be one of the reasons Chinese EFL students find it difficult to establish a research gap, while their originality may also be limited by their inability to think critically. To some extent, creating a research gap means challenging the authorities for Chinese students. However, the Chinese rhetoric pattern is more to be eclectic, and students subconsciously avoid divergent viewpoints, because, according to Confucius, "harmony" is advisable and permanent (He, 1996, cited in Huang & Brown, 2009).

Another example is that the interference of the L1 on the L2 is not only at the linguistic level but also at the cognitive level. Xu (2012) indicates that, driven by traditional Chinese rhetoric that a human being conducts the actions, the frequent use of personal reference and animated subject sentences is a noted feature in Chinese EFL writing. In order to improve impartiality in English academic writing, this type of usage should be avoided. Furthermore, the usage of verbs and verb phrases, rather than nominalization, is more common, as a result of the intuitive and imagined Chinese worldview. This, on the other hand, is against the abstract western way of thinking, which says that English academic writing should be formal and abstract.

2.9. Pedagogical Implications

Academic writing, a vital language ability that shapes one's academic career, is significantly more challenging than other talents. Due to insufficient training in discourse competency and metacognition awareness, Chinese students frequently do poorly in academic writing and require urgent effective instructions. Here, some inspiration is provided as follows:

First, English for Academic Purposes should be added as a compulsory course for students at college level, and teachers in tertiary education should flexibly use a genre-based teaching approach as the holistic method to teach academic writing. To quickly acquire the rules for academic writing, students need to learn the syntaxtical and lexical knowledge summarized by researchers from thousands of professionals. Academic writing, similar to other writing genres, has its own specific writing structure, writing styles, and discourse skills, which should be taught in a systematic way. It is useful for writing teachers to connect a language's formal and functional qualities in order to help students understand how and why linguistic rules are used for specific rhetorical effects. (Kim & Kim, 2005). The genre-based teaching approach is also effective for beginning and intermediate level learners to understand how writers deliver ideas through such organizations and to alleviate their anxieties about the writing process.

Second, the content-based approach should be used as a means of teaching academic writing. According to Liaw (2007), the focus of content-based teaching is not only on learning English but also on using English as a medium in a variety of areas. Content-based language instruction is advantageous for piqueing students' interests and then improving comprehension. Second language acquisition, according to Krashen (1982), can only be achieved by exposure to understandable input in a low-anxiety environment. Students might be more motivated to think and write in the target language with content-based classroom activities and instructions (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989, cited in Liaw, 2007). It is anticipated that this method of instruction aids in the development of students' critical thinking skills and the formation of proper writer identities. Future research might look into whether using a content-based teaching method in academic writing helps Chinese EFL students develop their writer identity and critical thinking skills.

3. Conclusion

The study investigates factors that influence Chinese EFL students' academic writing ability and the findings indicate that discourse competence, involving pragmatic skills and linguistic knowledge, and metacognition awareness, specifically critical thinking ability and writer identity, are two major issues that affect students' writing for academic purposes. The two reasons are closely interwoven and affect each other.

According to Casanave (2002), the most difficult challenge for graduate students is to excel in the "game of academic writing." In the academic discourse community, there should be agreement on the importance of academic writing. When students don't do well, it should be looked into more to find out what influences Chinese EFL students' academic writing, and the field of teaching Chinese EFL students how to write academically needs to be expanded as well.

However, the study is restricted by the small sample size of relevant literature and a dearth of related experimental studies. Future research could increase the scope of the investigation and include additional variables.

Acknowledgments

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