

CHAPTER 2.

TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE WRITING INSTRUCTION IN CHINA

Danling Fu and Marylou Matoush

University of Florida and Western Carolina University

English is taught in every school throughout the People's Republic of China (PRC). It is estimated that there are more teachers of English in China than in the United States, and that by year 2016, China will have the largest English speaking population in the world. While English learning is widespread in China, indigenous English language teacher's perceptions regarding the teaching of English writing have led us to believe that English, although popular, may be seen as a tool meant for limited functional mimetic use rather than as a vehicle for enabling full fledged empowered bilingual communicative competence in a globalized world. We found a heavy focus on linguistically controlled language instruction rather than literacy instruction embedded in the humanities complemented by socially complex pragmatics. That focus, plus a lack of teacher preparation and a test-driven orientation may contribute to English writing instruction that pales in comparison to Chinese writing instruction. It is possible that the two forms of instruction differ to the point that Chinese students fail to transfer strategies from one to another and that the difference contributes to poor national scores on tests of writing in English and positions them as mere linguistic manipulators rather than as biliterate bilinguals.

BACKGROUND

HUMANITIES-BASED TRADITIONAL L1 WRITING INSTRUCTION

China has a rich history of valuing writing dating back to early Confucian age. Like traditional native language writing instruction in Europe, traditional writing instruction in China was deeply rooted in a classical vision of the humanities and a desire to perpetuate the wisdom of the ages via the development of an academically elite class. Instruction in the two hemispheres, although different in content and emphasis, bore many similarities. Both traditions focused

on the education of the affluent, yet allowed a degree of advancement through education. Both emphasized canonical texts. Student writing was evaluated in both by canonical standards of genre, style, grammar, spelling, and handwriting or calligraphy. Although, Europeans appear to have been more inclined to judge simple literacy by the ability to read the Bible and advanced literacy through close reading, the Chinese placed a greater emphasis on writing as evidenced by the elevation of calligraphy to an artistic form and the institutionalization of civil service writing exams.

These humanities-based approaches dominated writing instruction until and throughout the twentieth century despite the egalitarian turn associated with Maoism. Indeed, in China, according to Li (1996), writing teachers “perceive of themselves and act like a link between the past and student to form an unbroken link that stretches as far back as three thousand years” (p. 96). One of Li’s interviewees stated: “... tradition is still alive. Teachers still prefer writing that demonstrates a good grasp of vocabulary, history, and classic works, uses vivid imagery, and employs a variety of rhetorical devices. The use of the colloquial and vulgar is considered a lack of elegance and beauty and is looked down upon” (p. 65). While steeping students in a culture-bound historical perspective, such instruction situates writing as literate activity or as a fully developed tool for thinking and communicating within Chinese culture, but may not adequately prepare any but the most advanced students to manage the “interpretive ambiguity” (Bhabha, 1997) necessary to navigate the multiple perspectives they are apt to encounter in a globalized world where culture may be viewed as something other than nation-bound or static. The problem is magnified when second language writing education takes on a narrow, linguistically controlled approach drawing neither on the rich culture-bound Chinese literacy tradition nor on any of the multiple meaning and composition based approaches from the West.

LINGUISTICALLY CONTROLLED L2 WRITING INSTRUCTION

Hu’s studies (2002 and 2005) indicated a linguistically controlled approach to L2 English language and writing instruction appears to dominate in China. According to Silva’s (1991) review of second language writing instruction between 1945 and 1990, Charles Fries (1945) was first credited with using principles of behaviorism and structural linguistics to develop an “oral approach” to second language instruction, thereby deemphasizing written language. Although Erasmus (1960) and Briere (1966) recommended the use of written language as a means to extend control and promote fluency, others, notably Pincas (1962) scorned the humanities approach in favor of the “manipulation

of fixed patterns” (p. 186), an approach which begins with systematic habit formation via language patterning focused on listening and speaking supported by reading and writing frames which eventually achieve dominance over aural and oral patterning. Repetition, patterning, and predictability across language activities are stressed. Writing instruction exists as a form of linguistic exercise focused on formal accuracy and grammatical correctness, consisting primarily of reproducing language frames, usually at the sentence level, followed by substitutions, transformations, expansions, completions of linguistic patterns using a controlled, but cumulative vocabulary and increasingly complex grammar. Concern for content beyond the acquisition of increased vocabulary, communicative intent, audience, purpose, or style is rare (Silva, 1991). The writer is positioned as a manipulator of grammatically correct sentence patterns. Studies of the effectiveness of language learning from this perspective abound including Ellis (1984), Myles, Mitchell, and Hooper (1999), and Schmidt (2001).

Kaplan (1967) and Hinds (1983) addressed the inadequacies of this sentence level focus by suggesting a contrastive rhetoric approach, which was characterized as “more a pattern drill at the rhetorical level than at the syntactic level” (Kaplan, 1967), promoting writing instruction as organizing content into patterned forms of traditional academic writing (Connor, 1996). Despite this strict structural emphasis, instruction is largely compatible with, but lacks the sociocultural depth associated with traditional humanities-based approaches and is apt to impose structures that are culturally related to the non-native language in an expectation of the development of nativeness in second language usage. The writer is positioned as a manipulator of text patterns and linguistic forms. Expository and persuasive writing amount to organizing a cohesive main idea with supportive details into topic, supporting, and concluding sentences; introductory, supportive, and concluding paragraphs; and the subsequent arrangement of those paragraphs into sections. The use of rhetorical devices such as precise definitions and evidentiary examples, classification or compare and contrast, and cause and effect are also taught. Narrative structures, when introduced, are similarly structured. Formal accuracy and grammatical correctness is emphasized. Matsuda (1997) objected to this “mechanical” view of the writer, recommending that writers be equipped with the ability to mobilize a repertoire of discursive strategies.

In China this approach has led to the observation that, “writing in English, when taught at all, has primarily been seen as a matter of filling in blanks, following pattern drills, and producing error-free text of the type associated with linguistically controlled writing and that the present teaching force in China is ill-prepared to teach English writing” (Spalding, Wang, Lin & Hu, 2009, p. 25). Further, despite a long history of Chinese writing instruction and current

widespread commitment to English language teaching, the PRC was ranked lowest in English writing ability internationally in 2008 (Beijing New Oriental School, 2010), though reasonably high scores were attained in reading and listening. There is research demonstrating that native language literacy skills transfer to and support the development of ESL literacy (Cummins, 1981, 2003; Kenner & Kress, 2003). However, Zhaohui Wang (<http://CELEA.org>) asserted that “Chinese students have sufficient opportunities to express themselves in Chinese,” but, that the gap between Chinese literacy instruction and EFL language instruction may be too great to accommodate the transfer of understandings from Chinese writing to English writing.

A SURVEY STUDY ON ENGLISH WRITING INSTRUCTION AT K-12 LEVEL IN CHINA

To identify the challenges that Chinese teachers of English face when teaching L2 writing, we designed a twenty question survey study requesting information about the nature of English writing instruction at the K-12 level as well as the preparation and support for teachers to deliver L2 writing instruction.

DATA COLLECTION

The Chinese education system has a unified curriculum in place nationwide (People’s Republic of China-Ministry of Education Website), but there may be differences in implementation between metropolitan and rural areas or rich and poor regions. Because we wanted to understand how English writing is taught at K-12 level across China, we chose to survey a substantial number of teachers, reflecting Babbie’s (1990) view that “survey methods ... provide a ‘search device’ when you are just beginning your inquiry into a particular topic” (p. 53). Before we contacted research collaborators in China, we asked visiting scholars from China for their review, feedback, and written translation of the survey. Then, in collaboration with the current visiting Chinese scholars, we sent a dual language survey, via email, to a dozen English language educators across China, most of these “research partners” had also been visiting scholars in previous years. We relied upon them, as our research partners, to distribute the survey to teachers of English at K-12 level.

Three months later we had achieved a 60% response rate, a follow-up reminder yielded a total of 123 responses from teachers representing 30 schools in 13 cities and districts. Except for Tibet, Uygur, Inner Mongolia and the Northeast regions, populated areas across China were represented. The number

of responses from each place varied from five to 25. Our Chinese research partners reported that it was easy to elicit responses through the social network in China, but those who attempted formal channels such as contacting the local school principals or the district board of education, received rejections or got no response. Two of our research partners generated no data, but quite a few made an effort to send the survey beyond their local areas. Of 123 responses, most were written in Chinese, some in English, and some in both languages. Most lengthy narrative responses were written in Chinese.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis began with open coding. We read all responses multiple times, highlighting commonalities and raising questions while “memoing.” We then categorized and attempted to chart data, making note of representative responses. Our memos included “code notes,” “theoretical notes,” and “operational notes” as per Strauss and Corbin (1998). However, we found that determining intended meanings from the written responses of distant respondents in another country/culture who variously responded in two languages was far from a straightforward task. The ambiguity of interpretation that Bhabha (1997) characterizes in terms of the “Third Space” was clearly apparent.

A number of our memos perhaps should be distinguished from Strauss and Corbin’s three types as “cross-cultural interpretative memos,” a term which more accurately reflects our pursuit of negotiation of ambiguous meanings between languages and educational cultures. Data was discussed with current Chinese visiting scholars in meetings designed to facilitate this cross-cultural data analysis. The three current Chinese visiting scholars, who worked closely with us on the data analysis, are all English instructors at university level in China; one serves as the associate dean of the foreign language department at a university, one is the associate chair of the English department in a foreign language institute who has been heavily involved with teacher training programs in China, and the third had almost 15 years of teaching experience in higher education. We relied upon these scholars to provide contextual/cultural-specific background knowledge and sometimes to get the actual meaning of certain expressions. For example, a data discussion meeting with these scholars began with the following memo and a tentative chart enumerating types of writing mentioned in response to a question about the types of writing their students were required to do:

- It seems that respondents had hard time in their response to this question confusing writing genre, writing con-

tent, or test format.

The current visiting scholars responded with the following comments:

- We may have different terms when we talk about genres. There are three genres we usually talk about: narrative writing which include personal narrative and story telling, functional writing which include letters, memos, announcement, and essay writing which includes argumentative and persuasive writing.
- English writing is very rarely taught at elementary level, where language learning is the focus. Children are taught to make sentences with vocabulary and sentence structure they have learned. Some teachers may consider this is English writing.
- Mostly students start to learn to write narrative to functional and then essay writing in English at the 7th grade. Commonly, teachers give writing models, and students write accordingly, like a template.
- We have a very test-driven culture. Teachers and students tend to pay more attention to what counts more in the tests. Correctness is the focus for assessment. Writing counts only 10-15 percent in the English exams and only narrative or functional writing is required.

This process inevitably generated not only code memos but also a substantial number of additional memos of all types which became part of the data. It also led to further questions: How do the teachers get their writing models? Do they write them themselves or get them from a textbook? Is an English writing test tied to curriculum standards? And, how are the teachers informed of these standards?

We went through the responses to each question one by one in this manner during multiple meetings with current visiting scholars. We then cross-analyzed the results from varying questions finding redundant responses in the course of axial coding. For instance, embedded in responses to one or more questions we found that 80% responders stated that they never had any professional development; 78% said there were no resources on how to teach English writing

provided to them; and 69% reported that they had little idea of English writing curriculum, but had to teach based on textbooks which focused on language learning. Triangulation to avoid misrepresentation involved asking the current visiting scholars to review our data summary and analyses before sending them to the research partners in China for member-checks.

FINDINGS

LANGUAGE FOCUS IN ENGLISH WRITING INSTRUCTION

Twenty-first century policy makers in China decided that formal English language education should begin at third grade nationwide. Our research data strongly indicates that the Chinese adopted this policy wholeheartedly and have gone beyond. Eighty percent of our respondents stated that students start to learn English in third grade, 11% indicated that schools start to teach English in first grade, and another 9% stated that many children actually start to learn English at the pre-school age. In addition, multimillion-dollar business ventures based on English test-preparation like the New Oriental Enterprise, bilingual preschools, and private tutoring are common.

However, English writing instruction appears to confront English language educators with many challenges. The majority of responses indicated that students at elementary level have three to five periods (45 minutes) of English class weekly and those at secondary level have five to seven (50 minutes) periods weekly. Time devoted to writing varied: 55% of the responses indicated that beginning in seventh grade, one period is devoted to writing weekly; 20% stated that they didn't teach writing at all; 16% said that writing was part of language learning or reading unit; and 9% expressed confusion about what we meant by writing. For instance, one asked:

Is sentence making or copying or answering questions considered as writing? If so, our students wrote all the time, as long as they started to learn English (from Zhengzhou, English).

While Hu's (2005a, 2005b) assertion that English writing consists mostly of language exercises may not be entirely accurate, our data, in general, seems to support Hu's characterization. Many responses emphasized "copying" as a key strategy:

Copying and correcting, copying and writing, translation

and back-translation, expanding outlines, organizing materials, summary, picture description, ... through copying how good writing should be, they learn how to write their own (from Nanjing, English).

Certainly, there is an emphasis on surface level correctness. Two teachers wrote,

In teaching writing, we guide students to some formal aspects: neat handwriting, correct spelling and punctuation, more careful constructions, more precise and varied vocabulary, more correctness of expression in general as well as acceptable grammar (from Shanghai, English).

Generally, [in writing] students are required to translate the Chinese sentences into English using some vocabulary or sentence patterns they have learned, or use some sentences to describe a subject/ topic. Skills are learned accordingly. Let the students practice the language, get familiar with the expression in English, consolidate the English words, promote their writing skills, support their listening, speaking and reading ability (from Nanjing, English).

Further, it seems that weekly writing periods are primarily spent talking about the language, vocabulary, and format needed for the day's writing topic, leaving only 10 minutes for actual writing. Usually a writing model such as a sample invitation letter was provided and the students would write strictly according to that model.

Also, because most teachers at K-12 level in China have to teach 50-60 students per class and feel that they have to cover as many "language points" as possible in each lesson, they reported that they often didn't get to writing exercises at the end of the reading units. One respondent commented,

We integrated writing into other language learning. For instance in a 40 minute class, we have 10 min. for reading, 10 min. for listening, 10 min. for speaking and 10 min. for writing. Students write their answers to the questions to the reading. In each reading unit, there is a writing exercise required at the end, but often we don't have time to get there (from Chongqing, translation).

Table 1 was developed from the responses the teachers made. Taken together, their responses point to significant differences between Chinese and English writing instruction.

Table 1. Comparison of junior high L1 and L2 writing instruction

	Chinese Writing	English Writing
Length	800-1000 words	50-80 words
Language	Variety and beauty	Correctness
Style	Unique and artistic	Simple and clear
Teaching focus	Model texts, variety of genres and styles, and rhetorical tradition	Words, phrases and sentence structure and grammar
Time for instruction	90 minutes weekly	20 minutes weekly
Teacher training	Focused on composition	Focused on language

Our respondents suggested that English writing is not linked to Chinese writing in the minds of students. Yet, studies by Spack (1997) and Kobayashi and Rinnert (2002) confirm that instructional approaches to language learning influence the student expectations about writing. 63% of our respondents indicated that:

- Students hope to know how to write correct sentences with complicated sentence structures and few spelling mistakes;
- Students can't spell some words they want. They also find it hard to arrange the order of the words in a sentence. When finished, they are anxious to know whether they are right or wrong.
- Students would like to have more chances to read/copy/learn from written work by students from English-speaking countries;
- Students want to know how to write beautifully by using words correctly and precisely.

In comparison to Chinese writing instruction, the English writing instruction not only has a strong language-focus but also is less valued as the native language writing.

LACK OF PREPARATION AND SUPPORT FOR ENGLISH WRITING TEACHERS

The data gave clear evidence that these teachers are not academically prepared to bridge the gap between Chinese literacy and EFL language instruction or to teach writing. 50% of respondents claimed that they never had any training in teaching of writing; 26% said that they had one course on English

writing in college, in which they were introduced to the five-paragraph format associated with the contrastive rhetoric approach, but never had any inservice training after they graduated from college; 17% stated that they learned how to teach writing from the veteran teachers in their schools; and 8% said they self-taught via their own practice, or through searching the Internet or reference books. A representative response read:

We never had any training in teaching English writing. Usually we go to observe other teachers in the school, but few English teachers teach writing, but only teach reading and language skills. So we have to learn how to teach writing on our own: for instance, let students look at a writing model, and ask them imitate how to write according to the model(from Hangzhou, translation).

Our current visiting scholars explained that when they majored in English in college, they learned English language grammar and other related linguistic skills, read British and American classics, and wrote a few reading reports and essays each year. After graduation, if they got a job teaching in a college, they would teach exactly as they were taught. Those who got jobs teaching at K-12 level taught according to textbooks, which mostly seek systematic habit formation via language patterning. It appears that teaching English writing in China is a brand new field in which few teachers have either much knowledge or experience.

While there is unified curriculum and set of standards for English writing instruction at secondary education (People's Republic of China—Ministry of Education Website), most of the teachers surveyed were not informed about its existence. The current scholars indicated that those who have a clear knowledge of the curriculum probably are either master teachers at the district level or leaders of English departments in schools. They asserted that teachers have little to say in what and how to teach, and are not prepared or supported in teaching English writing. Upon reading the survey responses, they chose the following response to represent the plight of English teachers:

We all know writing is important as it demonstrates the students' comprehensive competency in English proficiency. But there is no textbook or English writing curriculum; writing instruction became the weakest part of our English instruction (from Xi-an, translation).

Indeed, 51% of the teachers surveyed responded they didn't know if there was a curriculum for English writing; 31% said that they knew something about different levels of English writing for junior and senior high school students, but never connected those to their instruction; and 18 % gave no response, which might indicate they either didn't know how to respond or had no ideas about the curriculum. Our current visiting scholars explained that textbooks serve as curriculum. Teachers move from one lesson or one unit to the next without needing to know or ask about the curriculum for the grade they teach. EFL writing instruction is not prominent in those textbooks. Ninety-five percent of the respondents stated that they have never seen or been provided with any textbooks specifically on teaching writing in English. In addition, 35% expressed that they didn't like the textbooks they were provided for their teaching, stating that the textbooks were: "too boring," "not appropriate for our students," or "irrelevant to our students' interest," and "wish our students can read something written by or about the children of their age." When asked about who chose the textbooks 77% responded they were not sure, the remainder responded: "the Board of Education in our province," "the leaders of the school district," and "probably a group of people formed by lead teachers, education experts and leaders at the school board."

TEST-CENTERED INSTRUCTION

At first we were puzzled about how most teachers could remain uninformed about the curriculum and standards and how learning outcomes could be assessed if grade level standards were not clearly presented to the teachers. We soon realized that China has been test-driven for centuries and that tests, not curriculum standards or even the textbooks, may drive instruction.

When asked about the importance of K-12 English writing instruction in the eyes of educators, policy makers and parents almost all of the respondents stated that, as educators, they think that English writing instruction is important at all levels. However, 83% stated that high-school and college entrance exams were key to making teaching of English writing necessary at middle and high schools:

As a communication tool, writing should be an essential goal for English learners. And the most important reason is that the high school students have to take college entrance exam. Writing counts for 16% of the total score, that is very important part (from Zhengzhou, translation)

Probably because we are in a poverty region, we only consider what is in the exam important (from Hunan, translation)

We all think that writing is one of important areas that can show students' language competence. But it is easy to neglect, since it counts only for 10% of the total test score (from Nanjing, translation).

The test also drives the attitude of students and parents toward English writing. Quite a few teachers stated that parents didn't know what English skills their children should learn, but paid close attention to the test scores their children get on their exams, because scores determine the high school or college they can enter, and so signify the future their children may have. Since writing only counts 10 to 16 % of the English exam (compared to 42% in the Chinese exam), parents and students don't feel they should put much time or effort into English writing. One teacher wrote:

Since English writing only counts a small portion in the English test, the students didn't have any incentive to study hard in English writing, and often what they wrote makes them feel and look stupid, and even uneducated (from Kunming, translation).

Another wrote:

Why waste your energy for something no one cares? (from Jinan, English)

When we compared the English writing curriculum and standards with the writing test prompts in the English test for high school and college entrance exam over the past five years found online, a discrepancy emerged. According to a teacher in Hangzhou, the standards state:

Based on new standard of high school English writing curriculum, students should be able to write brief description of a specific event or incident:

- With focus and sufficient examples
- With variety of sentence structures and word usages
- With precise language expressions
- With proper transition
- With clear paragraphs and format

- With a strong sense of audience and purpose
(from Hangzhou, translation)

An exam-related English writing prompt seems less demanding (Die, 2009):

Context for the essay: Your name is Li Hua, the president of Student Council in Yucai High School. Your school is going to hold an English Speech Contest. You want to invite a foreign instructor, Ms. Smith, to be a judge at the contest. Please write an invitation to Ms. Smith based on the following event notice.

English Speech Contest

- Topic: Human and Nature
- Place: Classroom 501
- Time: 2:00 to 5:00 pm, June 15
- Participants: 10 students
- Contact person: Li Hua (tele: 44876655)
- Word limit: about 100 words in the following format:

Dear Ms. Smith

With best wishes,

This test question only requires test takers to restate the information with vocabulary provided. This demonstrates how a test-driven focus can contrive to lead teachers and learners to mediocrity by limiting expectations. Despite a test-driven culture, many teachers cried out for change. When asked “What would be your suggestions and recommendations in English writing instruction?” many uttered things like “Making teaching interesting and meaningful to students;” “Making teaching relevant to students’ life experience and interest;” and “Don’t just teach for test, but for real world purposes.”

DISCUSSION

It is worrisome that students apparently expect English writing to be different from the writing they’ve experienced in Chinese classrooms. While a newer, more communicative view of contrastive rhetoric is emerging according Connor (1996) and Kobayashi and Rinnert (2002), it is doubtful that flex-

ible communicative competence can be attained by situating English language learning in years of exposure to instructional techniques focused on the adoption of forms and structures developed in the Western world. Such a focus positions non-native language users to think of themselves as mimics who seek a surface level resemblance to nativeness rather than as empowered biliterate bilinguals. Empowering communicatively competent actors on the world stage requires preparing students to actively inquire into the affordances and challenges of various structural frameworks and modes of representation that can be mindfully selected, combined, or modified according to intended purposes and audiences. This would require teachers who appreciate the potential benefits of consciously using native language knowledge of writing during EFL writing and who demonstrate an ability to do so themselves.

CONCLUSION

There appears to be a significant gap that separates English language learning with its weak or nonexistent focus on English writing from writing instruction in Chinese; however, it is important to note that China is certainly not alone in perpetuating such a gap. In so far as language learning is conceived of as systematic habit formation via language patterning augmented by comparative rhetoric with the goal of inculcating resemblance to native language users, but not as literacy learning aimed at negotiating meanings and navigating multiple perspectives, this gap is perpetuated the world over.

Such an approach may be effective in terms of acquiring a new language's vocabulary and form, but treats the new language as something that is isolated from prior learning, thereby obliterating the possibilities for transfer of native language literacy, traditions, or perspectives. This separation between language learning and first language literacy is limiting for those who wish to pursue advanced study in English speaking countries and/or position themselves as biliterate, but also presents problems for those who simply negotiate meaning in a globalized world where nuanced multiple perspectives presented in English abound.

If China sincerely wants students to achieve communicative competence in a globalized, English-dominated world there is a need to move beyond the systematic habit formation approach. If English is to serve the multiple perspectives of an increasingly international community, educational focus on "erroneous, fossilized, inter-language versions of 'proper' English" (Nayar, 1997, p. 31) needs to be reconceptualized. There is a need for the development of theorized interdisciplinary (Chinese literacy combined with English language) education that is specifically aimed at adequately acknowledging the depth of knowledge

associated with native language literacy, while positioning students to grow into consciously flexible biliterate bilinguals who, equipped with a repertoire of discursive strategies, are able to demonstrate deeply structured, empowered discourse.

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