

A Study on English Writing Pattern Under the Impact of High-context and Low-context Cultures*

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Abstract—This article aims to identify whether cultural factors will cast influences on EFL learners' English and Chinese written compositions. By comparing the participants' English and Chinese compositions entitled "How I deal with stress", the author tries to figure out the different writing patterns in the learner's writing performance. 25 EFL learners are involved in this study, and the participants' written essays are analyzed from the perspective of textual construction, cohesive devices and syntactic complexity. The data was collected and calculated by Juku network system based on the corpus data inside. Four variables (ways of placing the subject, amount of sentences, mean length of a sentence, verb phrases) were tested with the help of SPSS 16.0.

The results tend to lead to the following conclusions: first: The low-context (LC) culture cast some influence on EFL learners' English and Chinese written works. Second: The factors of HC culture have little effect on Chinese learners' English writing performance now. On the contrary, the LC culture has some impact on their essays. Third: The syntactic complexity of Chinese and English compositions has suggested little significance in the same testees' writing performance.

Keywords—high-context; low-context; cohesive devices; textual pattern; composition

I. INTRODUCTION

Globalization enables knowledge and cultures spread quickly, western cultures have penetrated in Chinese people's life, especially among the college students. English, as a Foreign Language, (EFL) students have trained a lot to write in an English way, but they may fall into a stereotype when they recite numerous sample compositions to deal with the exams. The target language culture has affected the learners' writing performance.

Chinese and Western cultural difference in language application has great impact on EFL learners' writing performance. Language is the carrier of culture, and cultural features can be reflected in one's writing.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. High-context and Low-context Communication

The concept of high-context and low-context cultures

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was proposed by the anthropologist Edward Hall in his book *Beyond Culture* (1976). For Hall, context was "the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of the context." His work revealed that cultures were often characterized by high-or-low-context communication, which could be described in the following manner: A high context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, which very little is in the coded, explicitly transmitted part of the message. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code.

According to Hall (1976), the communication with the main reliance on context is called high-context communication, which the communication relying mostly on language is called low-context communication. Both kinds of communication exist in all cultures, the explicit definitions of high-context and low-context communication are given in his book *Beyond Culture* in the following manner (Hall, 1976).

The author decides to make a study on the divergences of HC and LC cultures based on the work of Edward T. Hall: *E.T. Hall, Beyond Culture*. "Table I" shows various cultures on a continuum rather than using only two rigid categories.

TABLE I. CULTURES ARRANGED ALONG THE HIGH-CONTEXT AND LOW-CONTEXT DIRECTIONS

High-context Cultures → Low-context Cultures
Japanese
Chinese
Korean
African American
Native American
Arab
Greek
Latin
Italian
English
French
North American
Scandinavian
German
Swiss

^a quoted from Samvoar and Porter, 2012

According to "Table I", China is a representative of high-context culture, while English and North American are low-

context cultures. High-context cultures are more reliant on and tuned in to nonverbal communication. Meaning in high-context cultures is also conveyed through status and through an individual's informal friends and associates.

In low-context cultures, the verbal message contains most of the information and very little is embedded in the context or the participants.

B. Cultural Divergences in Writing

Based on the five rhetorical patterns proposed in Kaplan (1966), Kaplan (1972) postulated the principles of discourse

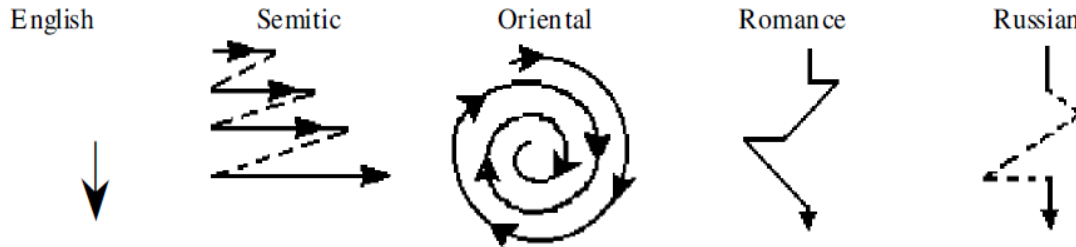


Fig. 1. Kaplan (1966: 15) cultural thought pattern.

According to "Fig.1", English rhetoric is logically linear based on its linear thought pattern; while the Oriental thought pattern is presented as spiral and circular, which leads to an indirect rhetorical pattern (Kaplan 1966: 13).

Several studies have been carried out to compare Chinese and English writing performances in recent years. The focus mainly goes to the comparison of different writing products composed by variable cultural backgrounds. Many studies in other countries excluding China (Hinds, 1983a, 1987; Eggington, 1987; Clyne, 1987; Connor, 1988; Ventola and Mauranen, 1991, 1992, 1993) have been done to investigate the writing features of diverse languages (Korean, Japanese, Finnish, American English, etc.). And the previous research has focused on the use of cohesion and the placement of main ideas in scientific paragraphs, the comparison of textual features and linear organization, the writing patterns and thematic development. Mauranen (1992) analyzed the use of cohesion and the placement of main ideas in scientific paragraphs written by Finnish and native-English-speaking scientists. The results showed that Finnish writers employed fewer selective demonstrative references ("this") than native-English speakers did. Another difference was the relatively late introduction of the central point written by the Finns in comparison to texts written by native speakers of English. Two studies, those of Evensen (1987) and Ingberg (1987), contrasted the use of topic sentences in Norwegian high school students's EFL essays (Evensen) and college-level Finnish-Swedish students (Inberg) Swedish and English essays (quoted from Connor, 2001).

A great deal of writing comparison researches (Nie Yujing, 2014; Huang, 2011; Xiuyan Xu, 2012; Yusheng, Li, 2015; Xian Chen, 2008; Fushan Su, 2013, Fang Qi, 2009, Lili Wang, 2009) have been done by Chinese scholars as well. Their researches have focused on text pattern, sentence pattern, discourse organization, thinking pattern, etc. Huang and Wang (2011) discussed the different discourse

organization and believed, among other things, Germanic languages tend to be linear in writing, in contrast to Oriental languages, which tend to be circular.

English discourse construction methods are linear, and the discourse of Chinese way of building is a straight line type, British and American people generally first showed his position, and then come to the conclusion that follows the "theory point where to go", and the Chinese first put facts, reasons, and then come to the conclusion.

organization, the compositions of American students are smooth and consistent while that of Chinese students are a little loose and dull. Yusheng Li (2015) and Xian Chen (2008) make the comparison between English and Chinese text patterns and state that Chinese students are poor in English writing, partly because they pay more attention to words and grammar, and ignore the text and text patterns.

Although the diversity of data sources is useful in helping to build a comprehensive theory of contrastive rhetoric, people need to be careful not to simply aggregate the results from various studies to form a model of writing style (Connor, 2001). Comparisons have been made between writers with a variety of native languages. And this paper tries to compare two different compositions composed by the same writers, and explores the differences in terms of textual organization, cohesive devices and syntactic complexity.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Research Questions

Three research questions guided the study.

First: Will the high-context culture influence the performance of Chinese EFL learners' English writing?

Second: What are the effects of low-context culture on Chinese EFL learners' English compositions?

Third: How do the textual organization, cohesive characteristics and syntactic complexity differ between English and Chinese compositions composed by the same testees.

B. Participants

25 EFL Chinese learners enrolled in Applied English Major at a comprehensive college in Jiangxi Province began

to learn English from Primary School Grade 3, they have been learning English for about 10 years.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

The participants are required to compose an English essay on the topic "how I deal with stress". Two weeks later, they are required to compose another Chinese essay on the same topic. The data used in the current study was collected and calculated by Juku network system based on the corpus data inside.

Written essays produced by the same testees will be analyzed in terms of textual organization, textual coherence as well as syntactic complexity. Four variables (placing of the subject, amount of sentences, mean length of a sentence and verb phrases) are tested with the help of SPSS 16.0.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is universally acknowledged that different thinking model in HC and LC cultures always lead to the different way of writing. High-context language prefer implicit expression, which requires the readers to use their own

knowledge to interpret and deduce the conclusion, and HC culture writers usually think that a lot of information has to exist in the external environment or personal experience, too much description will make the article long, and HC language emphasizes the readers to interact with the writers in the reading process. The views of the articles or conclusion can be derived by the readers in the process of the readers' reading.

In Chinese written works, they are loose-structured, ambiguous content and less logically connected discourse. Chinese thinking mode influences EFL learners' discourse organizations in English writing. Most of the testees do not put forward the theme "how I deal with stress" at the beginning, and the topic sentence of each paragraph is hidden.

A. Ways of Placing the Subject

EFL learners in China are inclined to be circular in their Chinese writing performance, while in their English writing compositions, they may transfer to be linear in writing. By comparing the students' written products, we can see that the same student may place the subject in different ways.

TABLE II. DIFFERENT WAYS OF PLACING THE SUBJECT

Measure	Group	N	Beginning	Middle	End	P
Place of the subject	Chinese	25	14(56%)	1(4%)	10(40%)	*.000
	English	25	23(92%)	1(4%)	1(4%)	

^a. *p<0.05

According to "Table II", significant difference can be seen between textual construction. And comparison reflects that 92% of EFL testees apply linear writing pattern in their English compositions. And 40% of the testees' Chinese written products still show Chinese culture-specific spiral writing patterns of organization in their writing performance. 23 (92%) EFL learners indicated the subject (ways to deal with stress) in the opening sentence, and sometimes preceded in their English essays, 10 (40%) students apply a circular way in their Chinese essays to develop the theme.

It has been found that Chinese composition is presented as spiral and circular, which lead to an indirect rhetorical pattern, while the English composition is logically linear based on its linear thought pattern. But it is quite funny to find out that 56% compositions show a direct way to develop the topic, in their Chinese written work, 14 (56 %) students indicate the subject of the essay in the beginning paragraph.

In American writing, the content of a speech or a lecture is supposed to be as clear and concise as possible, which means the addresser should make the right choice of words with exact and precise meanings, and eliminate unnecessary words and phrases. The main idea of a paragraph or an article should be placed at the beginning, with the supporting evidence or background information coming after the main message. Thinking mode influences EFL learners' discourse organizations in English writing. 40% of the testees do not put forward the theme "how I deal with stress" at the beginning.

B. Cohesive Devices

Cohesion and coherence are the basic principles of textual construction, they require the author to not only pay attention to coherence of the meaning, but also emphasize the cohesion of the language form. Chinese writing products with the HC culture rely more on parataxis or meaning coherence, rather than implicit ways. English written work with LC culture background depend on both meaning coherence as well as form cohesion.

The author explores the comparisons between the learners' English written compositions and Chinese written compositions from the perspectives of syntactic structures as well as textual construction.

The Chinese written works show that the author relies more on the coherence of meaning rather than the form, while the English composition indicates that the author relies more on the transitional words (but, so, finally, etc.) to make the composition more coherent and cohesive.

Through comparative analysis of students' Chinese and English written works, the findings show that 80% of the English written products syntactic structures are quite logic. The average length of the sentence is 17.16 words. And the average textual conjunctions are 13.11 words. Great unity and coherence have achieved in EFL learners' compositions. In these learners' Chinese compositions, the average length of the sentence is 21.15 words, and the average textual conjunctions are 6.08 words.

C. Syntactic Complexity

Part of measures is cited from Lu (2015), four measures was investigated between English and Chinese compositions.

TABLE III. SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY OF CHINESE AND ENGLISH COMPOSITIONS

Measure	Group	N	Mean	F	SD	T	P
Amount of sentences	Chinese	25	14.28	.017	5.54	.657	.896
	English	25	13.28		5.22	.657	
Mean length of a sentence	Chinese	25	26.0	5.84		3.424	* .020
	English	25	16.84			3.424	
Clauses per sentence	Chinese	25	9.56	.420	6.08	-1.102	.520
	English	25	11.4		5.72	-1.102	
Verb phrases	Chinese	25	13.36	.163	7.17	1.123	.688
	English	25	11.20		6.40	1.123	

^a *p<.05

As is shown in "Table III", little significant difference can be found in terms of the amount of sentences, clauses per sentence and average amount of verbal phrases. But mean length of a sentence differs a lot. The same participants will write longer sentences in their Chinese essays than in English compositions.

V. CONCLUSION

This article has suggested that attention should go to:

- The low-context culture has some impacts on Chinese learners' English writing compositions. Chinese EFL learners' English compositions are linear while their Chinese essays are more circular. The culture of the target language has some effects on EFL learners' writing performance. British and American people generally prefer to state their ideas at the opening paragraph. They may use the deductive model to compose their articles. While Chinese writers may first show the facts, reasons and then come to the conclusion, and they may also quote some idioms or proverbs to make the language more beautiful, for them, an inductive writing model is favored in their writing performance. The same testees may apply different ways of textual organization in their writing performances with different cultural contexts.
- In the compositions of 25 participants, it is clearly observed that testees may state their ideas in an indirect and deductive way under the impact of low-context culture. While in their Chinese essays, 40% writers do not tell people their ideas until the end of the writing, and they may not rely much on the transitional words or phrases to make the writing more coherent, rather they may attach more importance to meaning coherence.
- In the organization of the article, Chinese writings tend to use implicative expression, in a roundabout way to make the theme gradually surfaced, while westerners usually point the theme directly, they may prefer straightforward ways of expressing message. The results show that cultural contexts affect the choice of words, the structure of syntax and

contextual construction, as well as elaborate the inseparable relationship between writing models and the contextual culture. Empirical evidence has suggested that the syntactic complexity of Chinese and English compositions do not show much significant difference.

Then practical remedies are provided to upgrade Chinese learners' writing ability. Teachers should first foster learners' proper motivation to learn about the different cultural contexts, arouse their cultural awareness, and at the same time clear away their stereotype and help them form the writing model of the target language.

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