



The Differences in Thinking Patterns Between English and Chinese in Chinese Students' English Writing

Yunxi Fei(✉)

School of Foreign Languages, East China University of Science and Technology,
Shanghai 201424, China
20003342@mail.ecust.edu.cn

Abstract. The differences in thinking patterns between English and Chinese have been found to have a significant impact on Chinese students' English writing, whereas there are few analyses of thinking differences specific to the English writing of junior and senior high school students. Therefore, this study aims to analyze and investigate how some of the variations between English and Chinese thinking patterns act on the English writing of Chinese students aged 12–18. In this thesis, the main method of research is literature study. By collecting, identifying, and collating existing literature for comparative analysis, problems and reasons that emerge for this particular aspect of English writing among younger students are presented. For these students between 12 to 18 years, who are still in a state of further awareness of their mother tongue, differences in interlingual modes of thinking pose a barrier to English writing in terms of both writing content and structure. To improve students' writing skills, instructors must lead students to identify the differences. Meanwhile, it is crucial to apply appropriate solutions in their teaching.

Keywords: Chinese and English Thinking Patterns · English Writing · Comparative Analysis

1 Introduction

With the globalization of the English language, English has been a compulsory subject for most junior and senior high school students (mostly aged 12–18) in China since 1977. However, there are substantial differences in patterns of thinking between English and Chinese, which constrain and shape the use of the language all the time. [1] To effectively improve students' writing skills, teachers need to lead students to identify these differences and apply appropriate solutions based on thinking patterns.

An extensive literature is available on the differences in modes of thinking between Chinese and English, albeit with some differences in analytical generalization. For example, Wang summarises the features of each of the English and Chinese thinking patterns, including rational thinking vs. visual thinking. Then, he conducts a comparative analysis, whereas Liu and Deng firstly trace the differences in ways of thinking by analyzing

specific aspects such as word choice, sentence structure, discourse construction, and language style. [1, 2].

Previous research proposed various strategies for providing Chinese-English translations specifically based on differences in thinking, which focuses more on the transfer of information in bilingual conversions than on direct output. [3–6].

In contrast, writing instruction is not common in such studies. At the same time, progressive instruction targeting university students accounts for the majority of them, and there is a lack of summaries of English writing specifically for Chinese junior and senior high school students. [1, 7] Unlike university students, this age group is still perceiving and refining their mother tongue, and the learning of foreign languages is often deeply influenced by the everyday use of Chinese. In their English writing, a variety of Chinglish expressions emerge, making the writing awkward and causing misunderstandings in comprehension. Therefore, it is important to collate a comparative analysis of the differences in thinking patterns to benefit younger students' understanding of the two languages and to help lay the foundations for their English writing.

The present study begins by summarising and analyzing the differences in thinking patterns between English and Chinese based on existing literature. Then, starting with the problems that Chinese students tend to have in English writing, the study selects the collated differences to find the reasons that can explain these phenomena and then uses comparative analysis to logically categorize and present these differences in thinking. The main aim is to provide teachers with ideas for teaching English writing to Chinese students aged 12–18, which is to enable students to develop a better understanding of cultural differences and become more authentic in their English writing.

2 Comparative Analysis

2.1 Differences in Writing Content

There are distinct discrepancies between the preferences of Chinese users and native English speakers regarding the presentation of words and the selection of main ideas in their writing.

2.1.1 Visual Thinking (Chinese) vs. Rational Thinking (English)

Chinese is considered to be a language that focuses on visual thinking, while English is more rationally oriented. [8] In general, Chinese is image-oriented without the use of rigorous lexico-grammatical articulation and logical connectives for argumentation. Overall, impressions are more important in Chinese logic. [9] The Chinese way of thinking is mainly intuitive and perceptual, focusing on perception, experience, and sensation. As a type of pictograph, Chinese characters are also a concrete expression of intuitive thinking. In the beginning, the meaning of Chinese characters originated from the depiction of things in the primitive material world by the Han ancestors. As a result, Chinese characters were always associated with visual images drawn from reality [2].

Almost every individual character in the Chinese language has its own meaning without being formed into a word. For example, figurative expressions occupy a large part of the Chinese written record. Even in philosophies that explore abstract meanings,

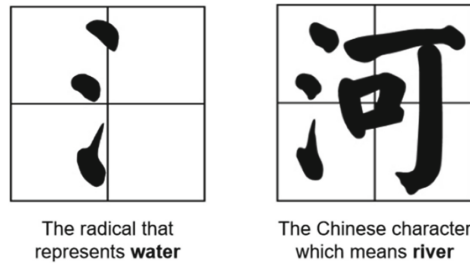


Fig. 1. Radical and multiple-component character

readers can often catch a glimpse of visual thinking. The famous piece ‘Autumn Water’ from the Taoist classic ‘Zhuangzi’ explores the abstract concept of external perception through the use of such visual objects as the river and the sea, the frog in the well and the summer insect.

This visual way of thinking in Chinese allows subjective feelings to be given greater importance, while rational analysis and functional purpose are both fused into intuition. The consequence is that the logical formal representation of objective reality is often neglected [10].

By contrast, English belongs to the classification of phonogram scripts, which record language by using a limited number of letters to record the phonetic sounds in the language. Compared to Chinese, which emphasizes the overall impressions, English focuses more on the component and is committed to specific details. [8] Details such as morphological changes and word order all play an important role in the understanding of the content.

Consequently, Chinese speakers are better at expressing abstract concepts using figurative methods, while fully abstract thinking and concepts are not very common. Native English speakers, instead, tend to represent concrete matters in terms of abstract concepts and have better use of abstract thinking skills. [10] It is necessary to consider the mode of thinking pays more attention to the visual whole or logical analysis leads to the following problems in the content of Chinese students’ English writing. As there is no hieroglyphic element in the English letters, the memorisation and spelling of English words pose certain difficulties for Chinese speakers who are used to associating meanings with words. In learning Chinese, many characters can be used to convey meaning utilizing figurative radicals, but this pattern in no way applies to English words. [11] At the same time, Chinese people sometimes only pay attention to the meaning of the chosen English words but ignore the part of speech, resulting in grammatical errors in sentences. This is particularly common with English beginners in China and accounts for most of the content problems in English writing in junior and senior schools (Fig. 1).

2.1.2 Dialectical Thinking of Chinese vs. Logical Thinking of English

It is believed that Chinese is a dialectical-Thinking language, While English emphasizes more on logical analysis. The thinking pattern embedded in traditional Chinese culture is contradictory and dialectical. Rarely is there a given premise or fulcrum in Chinese

cultural thinking, but there are always two opposing but unifying factors that are interrelated, which coexist and complement each other. They interact with each other and can only reveal their own meaning and value within the structure of a whole. The Chinese believe that only the coexistence of differences can constitute a contradiction, which is the source of the development and change of things.

As an example, since ancient times, the Chinese have widely believed in the 'unity of heaven and human beings. In this context, heaven refers to the various surrounding organisms that are intrinsically linked to man. [12] The "heaven" has a significant influence on the daily activities of human beings, but it can also be interfered with by artificial actions. The Chinese tend to place heaven, earth, man, and society in one web of relationships, examining their organic connections holistically and focusing on the relevance of the whole. They are accustomed to a dialectical approach to diversity as well as to the pursuit of harmony and unity among multiple opposites. In writing, the Chinese focus on the correlation of the intrinsic meaning of the whole, rather than often analysing each part individually and giving less consideration to entities, individual concrete elements. [13] Multiple perspectives are more likely to be accepted at the same time in Chinese writing because of the belief that different things have their own meanings and constrain each other. Chinese writing favours a more dialectical and holistic approach to thinking.

In contrast, there is a strict sense of logic in English [14]. Native English speakers are better at abstract thinking than the Chinese, with an analytical style of thinking. This analytical way of thinking divides the universe into two distinct worlds, making clear distinctions between subject and object, human beings and nature, spirit and matter, thought and existence, soul and body, phenomena and essence, and opposing the two to make an in-depth analytical study of this dualistic world separately. [14] In Western philosophy, the pursuit of alternate contrasts in reasoning has been a long-standing practice, leading to the development of a logical mode of thinking. [8] In many cases, things are either black or white, and there is rarely a middle ground or a combination of the two in English writing. [9].

Both the pursuit of harmony and unity of the world by the Chinese and the dichotomous thinking of English speakers will be reflected in the content of their writing. The Chinese mindset leads to an unconscious overuse of dialectical thinking in English writing. With the dominance of dialectical thinking, Chinese people often support more than one position in argumentative essays. However, these opinions from different positions are not properly detailed and often logically conflict with one another. As a consequence, the central idea of the essay appears unclear. Also, there is too much meaningless exposition.

In addition, this difference in thinking patterns is closely linked to other features. The logic of English writing tends to be straightforward and clear, and ideas can often be swept away at a glance. On the contrary, Chinese thinking strives for harmony among multiple elements and seems to be more tortuous, requiring further connection to specific content to figure out the logic. This causes Chinese students to make the mistake of failing to clarify the ideas in their English writing, especially when they started writing argumentative essays in English in junior or senior high school. Excessive long padding and ambiguous statements make their essays unfocused. As a result of not fitting into the traditional English mindset, these writings turn out to be perplexing.

2.2 Differences in Writing Structure

For Chinese students, differences in sentence structure and writing coherence play an important role in English writing. Similar to writing content, the framework and linking of the text are intimately aligned with the discrepancies in thinking between the two languages.

2.2.1 Passive Voice vs. Active Voice

Although the passive voice is a linguistic phenomenon found in both languages, due to the differences in thinking and expression habits between the two languages, the active voice is commonly used in Chinese, while the passive voice is used much more frequently in English than in Chinese.

In English, the basic structure of the passive voice is the copula *be* + the past participle of the verb. The preposition ‘*by*’ introduces the perpetrator (which can also be omitted) and it is also common to use *get* as an auxiliary verb. In terms of semantic function, the English passive voice is mainly used to express objectivity. According to statistics, the English passive voice occurs most frequently in academic corpora, with 25% of all finite verbs using the passive voice. [15] In academic discourse, verbs that appear mainly in the passive voice are usually those that represent scientific analysis and research, such as *test*, *analyse*, and *interpret*. In addition, words such as *blame*, *arrest* and *hit* are often used in the passive voice when it is inappropriate to mention the perpetrator of a negative event in the news. It can be seen that the use of the passive voice in the news genre also has the semantic function of indicating something unfortunate or unpleasant [16].

In Chinese, the Chinese character ‘被’ (*Bei*) is often used to help verbs form the passive voice. In this type of sentence, the perpetrator can either be omitted or placed between ‘*Bei*’ and the verb. In spoken Chinese, the character ‘*Bei*’ can also be replaced by other Chinese characters. This structure has some similarities with the English passive, but there is a fundamental difference in that the verbs in the active and passive voice in Chinese are homographs, whereas in English these verbs must be morphed. [17] Secondly, most Chinese grammarians believe that the main form of the Chinese passive voice (i.e., the ‘*Bei*’ clause) denotes a pejorative meaning. [18] Wang points out that the ‘*Bei*’ in the common passive voice in Chinese is developed from the meaning of “suffer.” As a result, this grammatical structure often indicates misfortune or unpleasantness. [19] Although the use of the passive voice in modern Chinese has expanded significantly with the influence of Western languages (especially English), sentences that contain the passive voice to express unwanted or unpleasant situations remain the majority.

In summary, although the Chinese passive can denote both objectivity and unpleasantness semantically, as can the English passive voice, the priorities are reversed. The increasing use of the passive tense to indicate objectivity in Chinese is obviously influenced by Western languages and is not as common as the other semantics. [16] This may explain why the use of the passive voice in Chinese seems to be more restricted, with the predominant ‘*Bei*’ structure being used much less frequently than the common structure of passive voice in English. Therefore, for Chinese learners of English, the proper use of passive sentences to show objectivity will make the writing more authentic and reduce Chinglish expressions.

However, some scholars might argue that it is wrong to assume that the use of passive structures necessarily produces a marked effect. [20] From another aspect, new problems have emerged because of the excessive use of the passive voice by some Chinese students in their English writing. Due to a lack of instruction, some students who are aware of the difference in language habits begin to use the passive voice without restraint. This results in a failure to articulate their ideas with clarity, conciseness, and power in the essays. By over-admiring the passive voice, the sentence structure becomes unwieldy when viewed in its entirety. [21] The ideas cannot be expressed well either.

2.2.2 Parataxis and Hypotaxis

Most studies have concluded that one of the most important differences between the English and Chinese thinking patterns is that English emphasizes parataxis while Chinese stresses hypotaxis [22, 23].

Lian points out that the main difference between ‘hypotaxis’ and ‘parataxis’ is that the former refers to the linguistic connection between words or clauses that express their grammatical meaning and logical relations, whereas the latter, on the contrary, expresses their grammatical meaning and logical relations through the meaning of the words or clauses. [22] The concepts of hypotaxis and parataxis can be defined in both narrow and broad senses. In a narrow sense, hypotaxis and parataxis are lexical and syntactic. A sentence is in hypotaxis when there are function words between words or clauses to indicate their conjunction, while it is in parataxis when there is no conjunction between compound sentences and their relationship takes place implicitly. Generally, hypotaxis and parataxis are considered to be the basic rules of organization and expression of language. Because of their systematic nature, the use of both is not limited to the lexical and syntactic levels but can also occur at a broader linguistic level, such as discourse [23].

English has a great focus on hypotaxis due to its more varied means of combining forms. In the first place, affixes are applied to words to indicate their grammatical class, making it clear how they are related to each other. [24] For example, in the word ‘obviously,’ the suffix ‘-ly’ allows one to know immediately that it is an adverb. Meanwhile, there are strict morphological changes in English, which provide a distinctive picture of the grammatical depth of the relationship between words. In the sentence “It has been 4 years since I smoked.”, the word “smoked” suggests that the speaker must have quit smoking. However, Chinese learners of English may misinterpret it as “the speaker has been smoking for four years” since there is no strict morphological change in Chinese.

In contrast, Chinese as an analytic language is not equipped with adequate mechanisms for morphological change. For example, there are no singular or plural forms of Chinese nouns, and verbs themselves do not have various tense changes. As a result, Chinese texts do not provide readers with visual clues of syntactic structure in the way that English does. In this way, the Chinese tend to structure statements according to semantic relations, and grammatical relations are covert and ambiguous, with the basic feature of paradoxical linkage [24].

It is striking to note that English, with its emphasis on hypotaxis, employs a great deal of ‘subordination’ in its writing, whereas in Chinese, ‘coordination’ is the predominant form of sentence construction. [24] In Chinese literary writing, nouns can

even be juxtaposed or connected directly, without any linking devices in between. This has brought about a general lack of use of linking devices by Chinese students in their English writing.

In addition, misuse and inappropriate choices of conjunctions are also common in Chinese students' English writing. According to statistics, Chinese students use 'so' more than twice as often as native English speakers but use more written conjunctions such as 'before' only two-thirds as often as native speakers. Thus, compared to native speakers, there is a clear tendency for Chinese students to be more colloquial in their written language. [25] Therefore, It is also necessary for Chinese students to consider how to choose the appropriate cause-and-effect conjunctions in English writing that reflect the hypotaxis of English.

3 Conclusion

To sum up, by analyzing the existing literature and comparing the differences in thinking between English and Chinese, this study illustrates the respective characteristics of content and structure in writing and points out the various problems faced by Chinese junior and senior high school students in English writing. Firstly, in terms of content selection, Chinese people tend to use visual thinking and focus on the whole image, while English speakers generally focus on logical analysis and reasoning in a clear sequence. Furthermore, dialectical thinking leads Chinese students to support excessive points of view at the same time in their English writing, making their expressions ambiguous and not sufficiently concise. In terms of sentence structure, there is a clear distinction between English and Chinese in terms of whether the passive voice or the active voice is used more often, and whether words are linked in hypotaxis or parataxis. For Chinese students, these differences have led to difficulties in mastering the use of passive voice and connectives, either insufficient or too much.

The present study helps Chinese junior and senior high school students to understand the differences in thinking patterns between Chinese and English and thus guides them to some extent in writing more authentic English. However, only a few of the differences between English and Chinese thinking were selected for this study, and many details have not been developed. For writing instruction, the relevant cooperation of English teachers is also crucial. Future research could break down the types of differences to provide more detailed guidance for teachers in terms of the existing problems to better assist students in their English writing.

References

1. H.Liu, L.Deng. Influences of Different English and Chinese Thinking Modes upon College English Writing [J]. Journal of Xi'an Foreign Languages University,2005,13(1):78-80. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1673-9876.2005.01.024>.
2. D.Wang. The Different Modes of Thought Between English and Chinese Nations Embodied in Their Words and Language[J]. Foreign Languages and Their Teaching,2003(3):34-36. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1004-6038.2003.03.010>.

3. Z.Ye, Y.Deng. The Transfer of Thought Patterns in the Course of Translation[J]. Shanghai Journal of Translators for Science And Technology, 2003(3):43-45. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1672-9358.2003.03.013..>
4. L.Liu. Differences between Chinese and Western Thinking and Its Influences on Chinese-English and English-Chinese Translation[J]. Journal of Southwest University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Science), 2002,23(8):266-269. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1004-3926.2002.08.066>.
5. Y.Chen. Translation Strategies and Features of English and Chinese on the Basis of the Contrasts of Patterns of Thought[J]. Journal of Hubei University of Education,2009,26(1):125-127. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1674-344X.2009.01.047>.
6. C.Gao. Strengthen the Language Thinking Contrast Practice in Translation Teaching[J]. Journal of Wuxi Institute of Technology,2005,4(1):53-55. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1671-7880.2005.01.020>.
7. P.Wang, W.Liu. Discrepancies of the Oriental & Occidental modes of thinking and its effect on college English writing[J]. Foreign Language World,2001(5):66-72.
8. Y.Wang, J.Chen. Differences of English and Chinese as Written Languages and Strategies in English Writing Teaching[J]. Theory & Practice in Language Studies, 2013, 3(4).
9. P.Fu. Difference between English and Chinese Thinking Pattern—Based on Sa-pir-Whorf Hypothesis[J]. Overseas English (Volume 2), 2021(6)94-95
10. C.Gao. Strengthen the Language Thinking Contrast Practice in Translation Teaching [J]. Journal of Wuxi Institute of Technology, 2005, 4(1):53-55. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1671-7880.2005.01.020>.
11. Q.Shang, H.hu, W.Wang, L.Liu. The Impact of Chinese and English Thinking Differences on English Writing and Their Coping Strategies[J]. Shannxi Jiaoyu (Gaojiao), 2008(9):45-46. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1002-2058.2008.09.036>.
12. Y.Tang. On the Unity of Heaven and Human Beings[J]. History of Chinese Philosophy,2005(2):5-10,78. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1005-0396.2005.02.001>.
13. Z.Zuo. On Different Thinking Modes between English and Chinese and English Inanimate Subjects[J]. Journal of Guangxi Teachers Education University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition),2004,25(4):107-110,120. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1002-5227.2004.04.026>.
14. S.Lian. Foreign Languages and Their Teaching[J]. On Chinese and Western Ways of Thinking, 2002, (2)..
15. Biber, D.et al.2000.Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English [M]. Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. p476.
16. H.Wang. A Comparative Study on Passive Voice in English and Chinese [J]. Journal of China Youth University for Political Sciences, 2007, 26(5):111-115. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1002-8919.2007.05.024>.
17. Y.Shi. Different semantic structures of verbs between English and Chinese and the effects on passive expressions[J]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research,2004,36(6):403-411. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1000-0429.2004.06.001>.
18. Q.Zhang. Overview of the study of the “Bei” clause[J]. Journal of Nanjing Xiaozhuang University,1999(3):78-86.
19. L.Wang. History of Chinese Grammar[M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press. 1989.
20. Brown.G. and George Yule. Discourse Analysis. London: Cambridge University Press. 1983: 128.
21. R.He. A Comparison between Chinese and Foreign Scientific and Technical Periodicals-Voice Distribution and Front-Weight Sentence's Use Frequency[J]. Shanghai Journal of Translators for Science and Technology,2004(1):16-19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1672-9358.2004.01.004>.

22. S.Lian. Contrastive Studies of English and Chinese[M]. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 1993. [3]
23. K.Deng, Y.Deng, J.Luo. On the comparison of Hypotaxis and Parataxis between English and Chinese texts[J]. Overseas English,2016(7):191-192.
24. Z.Song. Aspects of Parataxis vs. Hypotaxis between English and Chinese [J]. Journal of Northeast Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences), 2003(2):92–98. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1001-6201.2003.02.014>.
25. J.Mo. A Corpus-based Study of the Use of Causal Connectives in Chinese EFL Learners' Argumentative Writings[J]. Foreign Language Education, 2005, 26(5):45-50. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1000-5544.2005.05.011>.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

