



Problems in English Writing Caused by Differences Between Chinese and English Thinking Patterns and Coping Strategies for Chinese

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Abstract. The present study compared the differences between Chinese and English thinking patterns and the problems it poses for Chinese students in English writing, which aims to provide strategies to reduce the occurrence of Chinglish writing and enhance the authenticity of the articles. After reviewing the literature, this paper found that: 1) dialectical argumentation is a common writing method in Chinese, which can result in an ambiguous thesis statement in English writing. Both Chinese instructors and students require deep awareness of logical thinking and apply it to English writing and teaching; 2) Unlike the straightforward structure of an essay in English, the Chinese tend to omit details in writing, which hinders readability and comprehension of English writing. For different writing goals, Chinese students are expected to organize different structures of English writing based on rational thinking; 3) Diverse language conventions are also an essential factor affecting Chinglish writing, reducing the criticality and reliability of the article. Proper usage of English expressions can effectively support Chinese students in achieving correct and authentic English writing. This paper contributes to supplementing academic research gaps, such as the problems that Chinese students encounter in English writing under the influence of Chinese-English thinking differences. It is necessary to inspire future researchers to investigate comprehensive strategies to tackle Chinglish writing and approaches to the instruction of writing. Also, it is helpful to arouse the interest of both teachers and students in exploring and acquiring the differences between Chinese and English thinking, increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Keywords: The differences between Chinese and English thinking patterns · Expression habits · Chinglish writing · Writing strategies

1 Introduction

Both Chinese and English are the most important languages in the world. However, the two languages are diverse in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence construction. Moreover, being affected by various kinds of factors (e.g., the different cultures, outlooks

of the world, life, and value, thinking patterns) would be different between Chinese and English. All of these bring considerable challenges for different language speakers to communicate effectively.

With the globalization use of English, Chinese students began to learn English systematically in the 1980s in four areas: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In order to remove the language barrier, several previous research is conducted to compare the thinking patterns of Chinese and English. The differences can be approached and considered from various viewpoints, for example, visual thinking vs. rational thinking, generalizing thinking vs. analytical thinking, tortuous thinking vs. straight thinking, backward thinking vs. predictive thinking, and dialectical thinking vs. logical thinking [1]. Another Chinese scholar Fu analyses comparatively based on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, "Different thinking patterns between Eastern and Western not only manifest on language content, but also language structure on the following four aspects: abstract thinking and image thinking; synthesizing thinking and general thinking subjective thinking and objective thinking; active thinking and opposite thinking [2]." Many previous studies are proved that the different thinking patterns cause wide discrepancies in linguistic expressions, which hinder Chinese students during the process of mastering English, especially in writing.

2 Analysis of Differences in Thinking Patterns

2.1 Differences in the Writing Content

When facing the same writing topic, the Chinese thinking pattern would state dialectically, while English is a logical thinking language. As Juan points out, writing in English is to express a logical thinking process, with words and signs to represent certain opinions and feelings, so that it is accepted by others [3]. The Chinese hold a dialectical approach to all things, a view recognized by many Chinese philosophers across a wide range of schools, which is paramount to the Chinese view of life and the world [4]. Chinese lays emphasis on parataxis. According to Matalene, Chinese discourse does not rely on logic, but rather on references to the past, custom, and authority [5]. According to the Chinese folklore story of Cangjie creates the characters, Chinese characters are pictographs that developed from the footprints of birds. Driven by history, perceptual experience has a significant impact on Chinese students' writing. In other words, the Chinese focus on the use of analogical reasoning to express perceptions. Although expressed in a more euphemistic and tortuous way, the argument for the Chinese seems stronger when made from both merits and demerits.

Under the influence of diverse cultures, English emphasizes hypotaxis. As a part of the Germanic language, English has an important role in connecting relationships such as cause and effect and logic. Conjunctions are essential in English writing, whether to connect two or more sentences or paragraphs. Additionally, English expresses things in terms of black or white, with no middle ground or combination of the two, according to a strict sense of logic [1].

2.2 Differences in the Writing Structure

After determining the main content, the Chinese and English have their own approaches to organizing an article. It is widely approved that Chinese thinking is visual and indirect, while English is more rational and direct. As Chien claims that Anglo-American writing conventions permit structures within which an argument is explicit at the start and sections are unit signalled expressly [6]. Hinds states that the structure of the Chinese discourse is inductive, meaning that the facts and details that support the argument will be placed first, while the main viewpoint is raised at the end [7]. For example, in a spiral, the Chinese thinking pattern moves in circles, which lays stress on the whole and abstract. The Chinese traditional thinking pattern, which was influenced by Confucianism and Taoism, focuses on the ethics of human beings and seek harmony between human and nature [2]. Furthermore, through keeping with the ambiguous nature, the Chinese generally put the final inference at the end of a conclusion of an article. According to Snively, a Chinese participant at Harvard considered that to state one's thesis at the outset would make one appear incompetent and undeserving of academic respect [8]. The English focus on describing the contents more specifically with fewer abstract images. With a candid character, the English speakers express themselves straightforwardly. To arouse the readers' interests, they are used to writing their essays by stating their point of view and then proceeding to level-by-level arguments. As Fu summarized, "Western traditional thinking patterns prefer form and rationality, words are always clear and objective [2]."

2.3 The Differences in Lexical and Syntactic Collocation

Chinese and English come from two very different language families. Chinese being one of the Sino-Tibetan languages and English being a branch of the Germanic languages. Zhang et al. found based on the southwestern-origin hypothesis that there was an early expansion of Sino-Tibetan languages in an area of southwest Sichuan province of China, where exists a high diversity of Tibeto-Burman languages nowadays [9]. According to Emonds, middle English, which later developed into modern English, originated as a mixture of West Germanic Old English and North Germanic Old Norse, now known as the Germanic language family [10]. The effect of the discrepancy between Chinese and English thinking patterns is also apparent in the lexical and syntactic collocation.

Chinese characters are so vast and profound that there are about 100,000 of them to date. But there are no individual variations in Chinese expressions, only some phrases would be added to convert quantities or tenses. For instance, the past tense in Chinese is expressed simply by adding the time phrase after the subject of the sentence. What's more, being called "bamboo structure", Chinese expressions resemble bamboo joints, using commas to connect sentences, phrases, and even an interjection such as *Ow*. Different verbs are drawn on to express the timing and logic of things. In addition, when the subject is obvious or unclear, Chinese sentences with zero subjects, also known as sentences without a subject, are fairly common [11].

There are many ways that English words are formed, including affixation, compounding, conversion, blending, acronym clipping, backformation, and adoption from proper nouns [1]. Except for the lexical formations, the kinds of tense are various, such as the

past, present, and future tense, etc. English sentences have a prominent subject-predicate mechanism. On the basis of the main axis, the sentence components are modified to form a bunch of “grapes.” For the sake of sentence connection and fluency, it is necessary to add appropriate conjunctions. According to Yang, “In English, entire sentences are either connected by conjunctions, or divided by periods, or by semicolons [12].” Otherwise, every sentence in English must have a subject, which can be either an animate or inanimate subject; however, this rule does not apply to imperative sentences [11].

3 Writing Problems Caused by Differences in Thinking Patterns

The different thinking patterns in both writing and linguistic conventions cause some problems for Chinese students to master the English writing mindset without instruction. Thus, some problems appeared in Chinese students’ writing processes.

3.1 Expressing Ambiguous Main Points

Compared with logical thinking, it is hard for Chinese students to accommodate the dialectical writing style for stating a thesis clearly in an English article. Influenced by the ineradicable Chinese thinking pattern, students have become accustomed to analyzing issues from both sides of the fence. They balance all sides when writing, and sometimes ignore the views they really hold, which would reduce the objective, scientific and rigorous of their discourses. Under the effect of dialectical thinking, Chinese students typically write an English thesis with “making an agreement in opinion” when the essay topic has two conflicting opinions, which causes readers to leap to the article [1].

Chinese writing training usually focuses on narrative essays, especially in elementary and junior high schools. It is not until high school that some argumentative essay writing is done. Most Chinese students would lack the ability to write logically and argue, which poses a significant obstacle to English writing. In fact, most of the English writing that Chinese students face is centered on controversial topics that require them to clearly argue their standpoint and logic, for example, Chinese college entrance exams, and IELTS exams. Taking the IELTS exam for example, where writing has always been a shortcoming for Chinese students with low scores. There are many reasons why Chinese students lack logic in English writing, not the least of which is the lack of ideas. In other words, it is also a lack of deep awareness of various social issues and an inability to support a strong argument. There is no exaggeration that if a topic is hard to comprehend for most examinees, candidates would simply be unable to write when faced with such the topic due to a lack of knowledge of the real events that occur in the objective world. Therefore, most students in an exam could only write randomly. On the topic of an IELTS writing question (Too much money is spent in maintaining and repairing old buildings, some people think that they should be knocked down and give way to the modern buildings. To what extent do you agree or disagree? [13]), the following is a typical example of low-score writing.

It is widely known that many old buildings are protected well today because they have great significance for human beings. These old buildings are the symbols of history and culture. It not only contributes to the researches of the history but also has an important

function in educating the next generation. So it is meaningful old buildings should be allowed to protect well [13].

As the second paragraph of a composition, this paragraph is the first part of the main body. First and foremost, the most serious problem is placing secondary elements of the text ahead of the main points. According to the topic, the idea of this paper is that the government should not invest in preserving old buildings. But this paragraph is about the benefits of preserving old buildings, which is nonsense to support the main viewpoint. Following English writing conventions, arguments should be summarized in the beginning paragraph. The main paragraph with detailed examples supports the relevant points in order to improve the persuasiveness of the essay. Hence, incorporating the point of this example into the first paragraph as follows will make the whole essay more coherent.

Recent years have witnessed a hot debate about whether large amount of government budgets should be spent on maintaining old buildings. Some hold that old architectures, as heritages of cities, should be preserved and repaired. However, from my perspective, outdated buildings should be demolished, which could be money-saving and provide a safer environment for their dwellers [13].

All of the factors mentioned above cause Chinese students to struggle to get rid of their native language writing habits when writing in English and fail to explicitly state their main points.

3.2 Skipping Detailed Information

In comparison with rational thinking, the Chinese is perceptual and lays great emphasis on the overall structure of an article. From ancient times to the present, the Chinese have always been concerned with presenting the beauty of meaning in writing. For this reason, they would express themselves in abstract words and phrases. Ancient Chinese poetry can demonstrate this point well. The use of rhetorical devices (e.g., metaphors and prose) is a beneficial way to brighten up an essay in Chinese. However, the flashy and unspecific expressions are not well received in English writing, especially in writing for English exams. Instead, words are usually clear and objective in English writing.

It is common that Chinese students to become used to skipping detailed information when expounding, but they are unfamiliar with the specific and direct structure of writing. Yang notices that even while the original goal was to allow room for the reader's reflection, it would be counterproductive to make their writings sound so "vague" [12]. If a high level of shared understanding is expected in Chinese, instead of making everything clear, the writer would skip details, examples, and even explicit analysis on the data [12]. As Yu concludes, writing is a multidimensional communication between writer and reader [14]. However, Chinese students make problems with the person, mood, and modality by failing to take the reader's need and habit into account. Chinese students often have the writing habits influenced by visual thinking with the deficiency of information, which leads to incomprehensible writing. Not only is there a lack of reader awareness in the framework of the English compositions, but the expression of the language used by Chinese students can also cause confusion and stress to the readers.

3.3 Wrong Lexical and Syntactic Usage

There are only 26 letters in English, but they are with complicated variations of forms. In contrast, the morphological changes and the connection of words and sentences in Chinese are quite simple. But Chinese students often make several errors in linguistics areas regarding the lexical and syntactic differences between English and Chinese [15]. Wang and Chen state that unlike English, Chinese does not contain lexical inflections to denote tense changes, plural nouns, parts of speech, etc. [1]. Chinese students are accustomed to ignoring adding prefixes or suffixes to change the meaning of words in English. Besides, Chinese students usually lack conjunctions in sentence borders in English writing. According to Yang, several Chinese students have developed the habit of separating two or more full sentences using commas rather than conjunctions in their English writings [12]. Besides, some words with overlapping meanings, such as “drive a car” and “sing songs,” are added unconsciously, making the sentence seems lengthy. Moreover, the lack of clarity about the concept of suffix -ly leads to incorrect use of adverbs. Most words that end in -ly are adverbs, such as happily and honestly, but some words like silly are adjectives, which bother Chinese beginning writers a lot.

Furthermore, grammar is always an obstacle for most Chinese students in the learning process of English. As Ji points out, long-standing mechanical and deductive teaching methods used by English grammar instructors in China impede learners from clearly explaining the target language [16]. Under the influence of the traditional English instructing method, most Chinese students lack the ability to applicate the language. All the mentioned above are insignificant mistakes. However, the incoherent syntax and ambiguous elaboration would affect the quality and reliability of an article.

4 Strategies to Help Chinese Students Overcome the Chinglish Writing

The differences between English and Chinese thinking patterns cause a universal phenomenon called Chinglish, which appears in the writing of most Chinese students, especially beginning writers. Li defined that “Chinglish refers to the Sinicized English typically found in pronunciation, lexicology, and syntax, due to the linguistic transfer or ‘the arbitrary translation’ by the Chinese English learners, and is therefore viewed as an unaccepted form of English [17].” To help Chinese students overcome the problems, the following section contains some strategies for teachers.

4.1 Cultivate Students’ Cross-Cultural Awareness

Prior to instructing students on English composition, it is imperative to explain the specific differences between Chinese and English thinking patterns and expressions. Only when students become culturally competent will they be able to see parallels and variations, reducing misunderstanding and increasing cultural insight [6]. Song remarks that taking part in a class, learning about various manners and traditions through professional education, and focusing in utilizing English thinking patterns to write are all positive methods for students to develop their English thinking models [18].

As Lado points out, if having compared the foreign language to students' mother tongue, the instructor will have a better understanding of their true learning issues and be able to better cater to their needs when teaching [19]. In other words, mastering the English mindset is crucial for both instructors and learners, which lays the groundwork for authentic English writing.

On top of that, students are encouraged to keep positive attitudes to compare the two languages by themselves, especially to arouse the interests of junior high school students. Some comparative teaching methods can be used in class to help students explore the interesting characteristics of the differences between languages.

4.2 Make Students' Writing Goals Clear

Despite the focus on writing in the English way of thinking, teachers should help students be clear about their writing goals. Yu puts forward two writing objectives for Chinese students: first, to obtain linguistic knowledge such as grammar rules, vocabulary use, and rhetorical patterns; the second one is to obtain writing skills for upcoming practical needs, such as writing reports, memos, business letters, news articles, and so forth [14]. For most Chinese students aged from 12 to 18, English writing is exam-oriented compositions, which require students to write based on a controvertible topic in a limited time. Aimed to get high scores in examinations, memorizing advanced conjunctions and essay structures are useful. But for long-term learning, students are supposed to not only gain exam-oriented writing skills, but learn linguistic expertise and correct usages.

4.3 Help Students Develop a Correct View of English Writings

Teachers should cultivate students to develop a correct view of English writing, including organizing their thoughts and constructing the framework of their compositions in the English way of thinking. "The researcher initially believed that the first language, or mother tongue, would have a significant impact on writing in a second or foreign language.", according to Liu [20]. Therefore, to get rid of the interference of first language in English writing, it is indispensable to get familiar with the English writing modes. As Cai and Dai reported, "Imitating the linguistic expressions of the foreign language is the most efficient way to combat the detrimental effects of one's mother tongue [21]." It means that reading more authentic English essays is an effective way for Chinese students to build a correct framework for English writing.

Moreover, appropriate vocabulary and sentence structure is also a plus for a successful English composition. Not only do students learn the structure of the framework when reading, but they can also accumulate unfamiliar vocabularies and phrases. Song suggests that the most important aspects of learning vocabulary should go beyond just the straightforward translation equivalents provided by most in-class textbooks [18]. It is also essential to learn to apply them to students' own writing. With an English writing mindset, students can attempt to transform the expression into a passive sentence or to start a sentence with an inanimate subject. As the following two examples show.

(1) The doctor arrived quickly and examined the patient carefully; the result was that he recovered very speedily [22].

(2) The doctor's quick arrival and careful examination of the patient brought about his very speedy recovery [22].

The first sentence can be asked as a question by the teacher in class, and students are encouraged to embellish the sentence in different ways. By comparison, the second expression seems more vivid and concise, adopting inanimate subject and English language expressions such as using more verbs and fewer nouns. Admittedly, having a good command of English thinking patterns and learning to write in English phraseology would be bonuses in a composition.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, this paper aims to achieve the writing content, structure, and word collocation, which have discrepancies due to the total differences between Chinese and English thinking patterns. Thus, problems are caused for Chinese students in English writing, including wrong linguistic applications, jumbled ideas, and rambling compositions. In order to address these issues, several solutions are provided for teachers to assist students in reducing Chinglish in compositions and being able to write in a way that complies with English writing standards. A few limitations are summarizing that the present study on English and Chinese thinking patterns' differences exploded only in three parts. More aspects need to be investigated further. Furthermore, the strategies presented only provide a direction for teaching and learning, but more in-depth research is needed to develop appropriate teaching methods.

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