

# English Writing in Public High Schools in China and America: A Comparison Analysis

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## Abstract

*This study compared perspectives on English writing between Chinese students group ( $n = 60$ ) and the American students group ( $n = 50$ ) in two public high schools. A comparative t-Test analysis of the findings revealed that the curriculum and teaching method influenced Chinese EFL students' writing continuum of attitudes engaged in a variety of English writing types including test papers, essays, and e-mail writing. And two groups differed in the writing types of test papers and essays writing. The results found that Chinese high school students received more training of EFL writing for meeting the requirements of English writing section of the college entrance exam in China than American counterparts did. Both Chinese and American students apparently demonstrated a greater affinity for e-mail writing, and such similarities could suggest that they frequently used email as one of their written communication activities. Chinese students ranked vocabulary as their first priority over emphases on patterns, contents and grammar. Chinese students felt that the belonging of English vocabulary as Latin alphabet, compared to the Chinese characters as pictographs and ideographs, impacted their English writing most. American students showed most positive attitudes toward writing content, because American instructors expected that students were able to show their critical thinking in their English writing. The article also suggests teaching implications for developing effective ways to make transition from EFL context to English as a Second Language (ESL) context.*

**Key words:** English writing, Perceptions, Chinese students, EFL, ESL

## Introduction

In recent years, the number of international students moving to the United States from other countries to pursue higher education has increased, and, in consequence, they have had to face various challenges including English acquisition in an American university (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2002; McCarthy & García, 2005). Particularly notable is the younger Chinese international students who pursued their BA degrees in the United States and other English-speaking countries, opposed to graduate students who finished BA in target settings pursuing MA or PhD degrees. Although there have been many studies of the learning of *English as a Foreign Language* (EFL) at the college level (e.g. Choi, 1988; Kobayashi, 1984; Gonzalez, Chen, & Sanchez, 2001; Wang & Wen, 2002), little attention has been paid to the Chinese younger EFL learners' perceptions in their home countries before they make a transition from EFL to *English as a Second Language* (ESL) contexts.

Here *English as a Foreign Language* (EFL) learners mean those students who need to learn English and live in countries in which English is not regularly spoken or written as a language of community (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). And *English as a Second Language* (ESL) learners are "those students needing to learn English who live in countries where English is a language, or the language, of the community" (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p. 24).

## Purpose of the Study

This study compares the perspectives on English writing of 110 younger students enrolled in two different educational contexts the U.S. and China. Specifically, the research questions addressed for the present study are the following:

1. Do Chinese students and American students show different perspectives on English writing types?
2. What do Chinese students and American students' perceive contents, patterns, grammars and vocabulary in their English writing?

The first question embodies the primary emphasis of the writing types: to discover the differences in essays, test paper, and e-mail. The second question focuses on the attitudes on specific factors of English writing.

## Literature Review

### English Writing Instruction in China

In the late 19th century, English writing instruction began in American missionary schools in China and was mostly taught as an independent course or along with grammar instruction, with influence from English writing courses taught in American high schools (You, 2002). After the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, Russian became the major foreign language and most native English teachers left mainland China. During the 1950s and 1960s, foreign language learners in China were largely isolated from the English-speaking world (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). English education ceased for about ten years in schools and colleges during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and resumed in 1977, because, once again, English became part of the college entrance exam (You, 2002). Then, Chinese students started to take English courses from third grade. Now, as a required course, English has been taught from K-16 education to graduate school in China.

The national educational policy and teaching method placed a significant emphasis on the development of English education. The official national curriculum guidelines in China mandated by the Ministry of Education acted as a mirror, reflecting the students' English writing under the articulated knowledge of dominant political and ideological models (Atkinson, 1999; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Liao, 2004; Silva, 1990). The official standards of English writing for high school students (Level II) are as follows:

- a) being able to paraphrase the textbook, readings in a simple manner.
- b) being able to write down simply-structured passages without new words in dictation. The speed for reading aloud the passage is 110 to 120 words, and speed for writing is 15 words per minute.
- c) being able to write simple letters, notes, and notices about one's daily life; and being able to fill out simple resumes. There is no significant error in format, style and common diction.
- d) following directions, being able to, following directions, write an 80 to 100 word passage within 30 minutes with clear expression and without significant linguistic errors. (Translated by You, 2002)

In recent years, some educational policies were reformed in China, which allowed the major cities and some provinces to design independent tests for college entrance exams. For instance, the composition section of the college entrance exam of Beijing in 2004 asked students to write letters to friends regarding a foreigners' talent show which was called "Learn Chinese, Sing Chinese Songs." The college entrance exam of English composition of Shanghai in 2004 required students to write a letter describing their hometown.

The 2004 college entrance exam in Hubei province gave students an argumentative topic "The students were discussing about whether it was necessary to start learning English from childhood. Based on information given in Chinese, students were also asked to select an opinion and support it." The writing section of the college entrance exam of Hubei province reflected influences from American argumentative writing styles and writing section of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

## English Writing and Contrastive Rhetoric

Since the early 1960s, contrastive rhetoric research on writing thrived (Kaplan, 1966, 1988). Contrastive rhetoric in the context of second language (L2) writing took directions in the following domains:

contrastive text linguistics (comparison of discourse features across languages); the study of writing as a cultural activity (comparing the process of learning to write in different cultures); contrastive stu-

dies of the classroom dynamics of L2 writing; contrastive rhetoric studies conducted in a variety of types in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes (e.g., journal articles, school essays, and business reports). (Connor, 1996, p. 19)

Furthermore, Connor (2002) said that “contrastive rhetoric has had an appreciable impact on the understanding of cultural differences in writing, and it has had, and will continue to have, an effect on the teaching of ESL and EFL writing” (p. 493).

The international students’ “linguistic, cultural/attitudinal and academic experiences distinguished them from the English-speaking based writer” (Leki, 1992, p. 249). In other words, international students’ formal and explicit instruction and prior knowledge played a significant role in their English learning (McCarthy & García, 2005; Zhang, 1998). For instance, international students from Mainland China showed different writing features compared to the English native writers in the U.S. (Li, 2002).

Matsuda and De Pew (2002) suggested that the K-12 ESL writers should be considered in a subset, because their writing performance was constrained by their limited knowledge of English vocabulary, rhetorical patterns, grammar, syntax and content. Previous research confirmed the advantages for research on early L2 writing: first, it provides “insights into students’ previous experience with literacy development and instruction” (Matsuda & De Pew, 2002, p. 264); second, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the life-long process of L2 literacy acquisition and the general theory of L2 writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Matsuda & De Pew 2002; Valdés & Echevarriarza, 1992). However, the empirical research on EFL younger learners was ignored while most studies worked with college-level ESL learners.

## Methodology

### Participants

The Chinese students were 60 eleventh-grade Chinese students- 14 males and 46 females in a public school in Shanghai. All of them have been learning English for over 6 years at the time of data collection. The Chinese participants in this study were all defined as learners of English as their foreign language (EFL). The American students who participated in this study were 50 eleventh-grade English native-speakers in a metropolitan public high school located in Indianapolis, capital of the Indiana State. The American students included 19 males and 31 females in the study.

### Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire is both in English and Chinese included two parts (see appendix). The first part focused on EFL learners’ background. Specifically, it concentrated on gathering information on individuals’ age, gender, country of origin and native language and years of learning English. In the second part, seven major questions in Chinese and English were designed to reflect the students’ attitudes toward English writing types (questions from 1 to 3) and writing factors (questions from 4 to 7). The mean values were assigned the score on 5-point Likert scale.

### Data Collection

The questionnaires were sent to the schools in China and the U.S. and each subject was required to fill out the questionnaire. One English teacher in China and one English teacher in the United States were willing to assist in the distribution and collection of questionnaires. Each participant attested to the fact that he/she knew exactly what was happening in the study and knew what was expected him/her. The participants were reminded that their participation was strictly voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. One hundred and ten questionnaires were collected by mail and in person.

## Results

To answer two research questions, the comparative t-Test was employed to compare the responses across Chinese students and American students’ reviews toward English writing types and beliefs about factors affecting English writing.

### Question 1: Do Chinese students and American students show different perspectives on English writing types?

The first research question focused on students' perceptions of given instructional focus of test papers, essay writing, and e-mail writing in school and out of school. In order to gain further insights on the writing types in this study, the mean ranking of writing types from the survey were calculated. As shown in Table 1, the distribution of test paper writing showed significant difference between two paired-groups ( $t = 7.0584$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Chinese students had more opportunities to write test papers ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) than their American counterparts ( $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ). The distribution of essay writing values shows significant difference between the paired-groups ( $t = 3.84$ ,  $p = 0.0005$ ). American students practiced more essays ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) than their Chinese counterparts ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ). The distribution of email writing shows no significant difference among two paired-groups ( $t = 2.34$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). Both groups performed almost equally well in the English email writing beyond the classroom: American students ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) and Chinese students ( $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ).

**Table 1: Mean Reported Frequencies of Writing Types**

Types	Chinese students N = 60			American Students N = 50		
	Mean	S.D.	Rank	Mean	S.D.	Rank
Test Papers	4.55	0.61	1	4.56	0.77	3
Essays	3.8	1.03	2	3.78	1.2	1
Email Writing	3.17	1.39	3	3.48	0.99	2

1 = never, 2 = not very often, 3 = not sure, 4 = somewhat often, 5 = very often

In summary, the results show that the two groups differ somewhat in the writing types of test papers and in essays. Both of the Chinese and American students apparently demonstrate a greater affinity for email writing; such similarities could suggest that they frequently used email as one of their written communication activities. The preference for using the email indicates that the internet has affected the development of both groups' writing activities.

For Chinese students, the writing types' ranking order was test papers, essays, and email writing. The American students' ranking order was essay, email writing, and test paper. It was clear that the Chinese students in the English study experienced more test paper writing for college entrance exam, which was consistent with the previously mentioned literature review. American students had more essays writing opportunities. This finding may be explained by the fact that the American students had more English writing opportunities than Chinese students.

For Chinese students, English was taught mostly through reading and analyzing model texts (Li, 2002); they are also supposed to summarize the thesis of the text and analyze pattern. American teachers frequently assigned essays to value students' development of English writing. For instance, as junior high students, the American students took various English writing courses, such as advanced composition English language/composition, contemporary literature composition and expository writing. The textbook for English composition is *English: Communication Skills in the New Millennium*, introducing and practicing different types of writing (Senn & Skinner, 2002). By choosing from different writing courses as electives, American students could write for the monthly school newspaper, journalism production, yearbook production, which provided students with ample opportunity to freely express themselves in various writing styles. Although both groups wrote e-mails, the American students had more means to use their own personal computers (PC) or computers in school and home as a popular communication means.

## Question 2: What do Chinese students and American students' perceive contents, patterns, grammars and vocabulary in their English writing?

The second research question sought to identify the beliefs about factors that students perceived in contents, patterns, grammar and vocabulary usage. As shown in the Table 2,

The distribution shows no significances differences were among two paired-groups ( $t = 2.08$ ,  $P = 0.0961$ ) in vocabulary factor in English writing, which was equally important for American ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) and Chinese students ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ). And no significant differences were among two paired-groups ( $t = 1.10$ ,  $P = 0.5162$ ) in pattern factor in their English writing, which was equally important for American ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) and Chinese students ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ).

The distribution of contents factor is significantly different between the two paired-groups ( $t = 6.92$ ,  $P < 0.0001$ ). In other words, American students ( $M = 4.66$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ) thought content factor in English writing was more important than their Chinese counterparts ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ). The distribution of grammar factor shows specifically significant different between the two paired-groups ( $t = 5.40$ ,  $P < 0.0001$ ). In other words, American students ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) considered the grammar factor in English writing to be more important than their Chinese counterparts ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ).

**Table 2: Mean Reported Frequencies of Writing Factors**

Factors	Chinese Students N = 60			American Students N = 50		
	Mean	S.D.	Rank	Mean	S.D.	Rank
Vocabularies	3.62	1.18	1	4.06	0.87	2
Patterns	3.35	1.27	2	3.1	1.08	4
Contents	3.25	1.23	3	4.66	0.48	1
Grammar	2.78	1.14	4	3.92	1.14	3

1= not important, 2 = important, 3 = not sure, 4= very important, 5= extremely important

In summary, the survey results suggest that American students reported more positive attitudes (very important and extremely important) toward factors on contents and grammar with respect to English writing than their Chinese counterparts. The results on pattern and vocabulary in their English writing were similar for both Chinese and American students.

In order to have further insights on the students beliefs about English writing factors, the mean ranking of writing attitudes from the survey were calculated in vocabularies, content, grammar, and pattern. For Chinese students, the ranking order was vocabularies, pattern, content and grammar, compared to the American students' mean ranking order was content, vocabulary usage, grammar and pattern.

Chinese students ranked vocabulary as their priority, versus the ranking order on patterns, contents and grammar. This result provided some evidence that vocabulary usage was expected to be stressed for EFL learners. A possible reason was that Chinese students clearly felt that the differences between the English vocabulary, as Latin alphabet, and the Chinese vocabulary, as pictographs and ideographs, mostly impacted their English writing skills. The requirements for basic reading comprehension is 3000-4000 Chinese characters, while English requirements are 10, 000 English words. Pedagogically, grammar-translation, teacher-centered, book-centered, and methods have been ingrained in Chinese students for years of traditional education with emphasis on memorization of knowledge (Littlewood, 1999; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).

However, American students showed most positive attitudes toward writing content. It seemed clear that American instructors expected students to show their critical thinking in their English writing content. Students choose their own research topics, books and projects of personal interest in the independent reading course, which alternates with creative writing.



## Conclusions

This study investigated the perspectives on English writing types and beliefs about writing factors between the two distinct Chinese students group and the American students group. The results revealed that the curriculum and teaching method influenced Chinese EFL students' writing continuum of attitudes engaged in a variety of English writing types including test papers, essays, and e-mail writing. Two groups differed in the writing types of test papers and essays writing. The results found that Chinese high school students received more training of EFL writing for meeting the requirements of English writing section of the college entrance exam in China than American counterparts did. Both Chinese and American students apparently demonstrated a greater affinity for e-mail writing, and such similarities could suggest that they frequently used email as one of their written communication activities.

Clearly, Chinese students felt that the differences between the English vocabulary, as Latin alphabet, and the Chinese vocabulary, as pictographs and ideographs, was the factor which impacted their English writing skills most. The Chinese students' beliefs about other three factors - contents, patterns and grammar - provided some evidence that English as a foreign language was taught mostly through reading and analyzing model texts. American students showed most positive attitudes toward writing content, because American instructors expected that students were able to show their critical thinking in their English writing.

The findings also had some limitations that may restrict the conclusions to be drawn from this study. First, only students from two high schools in China and the United States participated in this study, which was limited to the number from both student groups in terms of the statistical analyses. Second, another shortcoming related to the results of the study is that it should be viewed within the context of the population studied: Chinese students at a top public school in big city in China. Third, the quantitative results of this study are based on seven items on the questionnaire, and other areas of English writing were not included and analyzed. More research on profound analysis by collecting additional empirical data in various areas of English writing would be useful.

## Implications

In spite of these limitations, the findings from this study have both theoretical and pedagogical implications. To the theoretical applications, this study adds a component to the existing literature in the field of contrastive rhetoric. This study provides a starting point for further exploration of younger students' attitudes toward writing types and beliefs about writing factors, although most of the research on English writing has been conducted with college student. A replication study can employ interviews to understand more fully the younger students' English learning experiences in their classrooms.

On the pedagogical side, ESL instructors should be careful not to attribute ESL learners' poor English writing to a lack of language ability, since ESL learners' writing performance is multidimensional with other elements such as influences from first language and English education in home country. The ESL teachers and researchers should understand current and future college international students' home English learning backgrounds, such as teaching strategies in vocabulary, patterns, contents and grammar.

In addition, The ESL instructors should be aware of the overwhelming time in English classroom with ESL students and they may need a gradual change which they may not be familiar. The ESL instructors have a responsibility to create an environment and help ESL learners to make transition from EFL context to ESL context that is conducive to international students' academic success. For example, instructors can focus on building up ESL learners' vocabulary in classrooms. If students are given chances to rehearse or practice vocabulary what they have learned, it may help them with the writing and thus lower their language learning anxiety in U.S. classrooms. Also, instructor should introduce the knowledge of critical thinking, and conduct comparison analysis of writing samples between ESL writers and native-English writers that may contribute to increasing the ESL learners' English writing. This study will point to a significant direction in order to dig further to examine differences of particular ESL learners with different first language (L1) and cultural backgrounds.

## Appendix

### Questionnaire

#### ***Part I: Please fill out of the questionnaire.***

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Country of birth \_\_\_\_\_

Native language \_\_\_\_\_

Years of Learning English \_\_\_\_\_

#### ***Part II: Please circle the answer.***

##### **1. How often do you write test papers in class and out of class?**

1) Never, 2) not very often, 3) not sure, 4) somewhat often, 5) very often

##### **2. How often do you write essays in class and out of class?**

1) Never, 2) not very often, 3) not sure, 4) somewhat often, 5) very often

##### **3. How often do you write Emails in class and out of class?**

1) Never, 2) not very often, 3) not sure, 4) somewhat often, 5) very often

##### **4. How important do you think the contents in your English writing?**

1) not important, 2) important, 3) not sure, 4) very important, 5) extremely important

##### **5. How important do you think the patterns in your English writing?**

1) not important, 2) important, 3) not sure, 4) very important, 5) extremely important

##### **6. How important do you think the grammars in your English writing?**

1) not important, 2) important, 3) not sure, 4) very important, 5) extremely important

##### **7. How important do you think the vocabulary in your English writing?**

1) not important, 2) important, 3) not sure, 4) very important, 5) extremely important

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