

# Textual Analysis of Chinese College Students' Typical Problems in English Argumentative Writing

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## Abstract

I claim that the rigid scheme of work, cooperative language learning, peer-error correction-based teaching methods within the learner-oriented strategy and process-product approach (peer-editing and peer-error-correction based classes and writing portfolio as the final product) help students learn how to write and help teachers survive the amount of grading. This embedded case-study and qualitative research is supported by the quantitative analysis of data obtained from the 180 Chinese students. I analyze student's group and individual progress/stagnation in terms of one month timeline as well as the one year time framework with more detailed analysis of particularly chosen essays and drafts. Qualitative results: essays became more coherent in terms of thematic progression; they contain fewer rhetorical questions that help them make up the 200 word limit, fewer redundancies and generalized statements throughout the whole process of developing the argument. Students started using real life examples, avoided rhetorical questions in the first paragraph; started supporting ideas by giving persuasive reasons and particular examples related to their real life situations; stated topic sentences clearly in the first paragraph and put forward the main idea first.

## Keywords

Teaching ESL Writing, collaborative writing, product-process oriented approach; peer-editing

## Introduction. Social Context.

"The number of students studying in Chinese universities has reached 25 million, a five-fold increase in only nine years" - said Zhou Ji, Chinese Education Minister. "In only a few years, Chinese higher education has transformed from an education for the elite to one for the public, a process commonly taking several decades to accomplish in many countries," said Zhou at a press conference (China has 25 mln college students, Xinhua, 2007). So we are witnessing an unprecedented expansion in the sphere of higher

education in China and it causes problems the academic and teaching community never faced before. The overall analysis of this unprecedented situation - "teachers are over-tired and students are over-worked" and students learn "deaf and dumb English" (Li, Moreira, 2009: 183-184; Ji, 2009: 375-376). These conclusions are valid for many Asian countries.

## 1. Literature Review.

### 1.1. Creative Writing in English as a Thing in Itself and the Toughest Course in the English Curriculum in China.

Writing is traditionally one of the most, if not the most, difficult parts of the English courses curricula across China (Huang, 2009), as Chinese students' writing skills are traditionally low due to huge differences between rhetorical patterns of Chinese and English and the same can be said about learners of Writing in many counties (Erkan, Saban, 2011: 165-166). "Unlike the native speakers of English, who expect expository prose to be developed as a sequence of claims and (direct) Aristotelian proofs, non-native users of English employ rhetorical progression of text that are incongruous with the expectations of the Anglo-American reader. (Kachru, 2001) Chinese learners of English often use the patterns borrowed from the locally produced textbooks, so the level of originality and creativity is predictably minimal as the writers have to produce a few opinions and insert them into the existing pattern.

The low English writing skills of Chinese university students are also caused by additional factors such as huge differences in the size of ESL Writing classes in China and Writing classes in the West (40-50, not to mention in non-English major English college classes and classes in high schools where the number of ESL students can be up to 70 in class versus 12-15 in a standard Writing class in America, or even Hong Kong), and also a significant difference in motivation. At Chinese universities, students need an ESL Writing course just to pass the national exams such as The Test for English Majors-4 and -8 (TEM-4 and TEM-8),

which is a prerequisite for getting a BA degree in English (Ji, 2009: 376). The important factor is that Chinese college students very rarely fail university courses, and if they fail, they have a chance to take this exam again and again. Students also cannot be expelled from universities on the basis of academic failures. Jingyan claims that the recent focus of Chinese employers and businesses on hiring students with good oral English skills contributes to the poor writing skills of Chinese English majors when they graduate. She writes: “students, teachers, authorities and officials alike have come to the consensus that more emphasis should be laid on the oral communicative abilities of students in order to meet the increasing social needs.” (Jingyan, 2006). The survey conducted by Wang Yi (2004) in Shanghai Jiaotong University supports the view that “students (65.84%) considered oral English as the most important skill” (Jingyan, 2006). The problem is exacerbated by the obvious lack of effective methods of teaching Writing in the exam-oriented paradigm that help teachers handle the overwhelming grading load. Weekly essay assignments, free-writing and keeping diaries somehow work with overcrowded Chinese classes and make the students write often and it helps them improve their writing skills, but without the teacher’s error-correction, it very often turns into an exercise in futility as it perpetuates existing grammar and writing problems. Teacher’s corrections require time and extra effort as the sheer size of classes makes grading and error-correction a daunting task. (Huang, 2009)

## 2.2 Introduction of the Process-Product Approach to Teaching English Writing

Normally, the process-product approach to teaching English Writing is a part of the framework of the interactive “Cooperative Language Learning” (CLL), “an approach to teaching that makes maximum use of cooperative activities involving pair and small groups of learners in the classroom” (Richards, Rodgers, 2008: 192-203). What is also often used is “the interactive approach, according to which the writer is “involved in a dialogue with his or her audience” and which holds that “the person primarily responsible for effective communication is the writer” (Johns, 1990), and the social constructionist approach, according to which “the written product is considered a social act that can take place only within and for a specific context and audience.” (Gabrielatos, 2002)

The emphasis is on the process of writing in all its stages – planning, collecting material, drafting and redrafting, proof-reading and error correction and also on students creating a final product in the form of a writing portfolio collecting

their writings together for others, not just the teacher, to read. It is entirely based on the cooperative learning as “group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated in increase the learning of others” (Olsen, Kagan, 1992: 8).

This approach made the whole process of writing real for the students (Myles, 2002: 2). It reflected the process that real writers would go through in writing for publication, so giving them a purpose for writing that went beyond simply writing for the teacher to gain a mark and to practice for an exam. The product – writing portfolio (Gearhart, Wolf, 1997; Schwarzer, Kahn, Smart, 2000) – would give purpose to the process of drafting, redrafting, proof-reading and error-correction that would otherwise simply be tedious and repetitive for students. Some modifications of the Process-Product approach to writing suggest the creation of the “community of writers” (Elbow, Belanoff, 2000: 9) and “a cyclical framework of teaching procedures comprising four stages: awareness-raising, support, practice and feedback.” (Gabrielatos, 2002)

## 2.3 Developmental and Progress Measuring Studies

Article based on classroom research in the Asian and, particular, Chinese context, abound showing and defending different methods of teaching English Writing such as “Creative Writing” that is attaching importance to “model works” (gao fen zuo wen) and encouraging student to imitate models (Gang, 2005: 143-145). In terms of argumentative writing, Cheng analyzed and longitudinally measured students’ arguments and usage of unjustifiable, relevant, important and strong reasons (Cheng, 2010, pp.12-18). The authors of this paper analyze on the basis of classical rhetoric and stasis theory how students made progress in formulating effective reasons in their writing throughout two semesters in their first college year.

Xiaoling Ji (2009, 2011) analyzed longitudinal patterns of Chinese students’ developments as writers measuring their fluency (error-free T-unit length), lexical complexity (T-unit complexity) and word type variation (Ji, 2009, pp. 381-382). Ji involved a relatively big group of participants of up to 100 students within

their 2 year studies and preparation for the national exams, so the value of qualitative results Ji obtained and qualitative analysis she performed is that the process of Chinese students' growth as English writers can be described and documented, so the teachers can easily define their students' weaknesses and strong sides to help them appropriately. We are pursuing similar goals of helping EFL/ESL teachers identify their students' growth potential for improvements in essay writing. We concentrate on different elements of writing process, namely those related to narration and argument-building as well as analysis of particular grammar errors that can be tackled within one month and one year of the standard university ESL writing course.

**2.4 Method.**

This paper falls into the rubrics of the action research (Nunan, 2002) and "a situated qualitative research" (McKinley, 2005: 139-140) supported by the quantitative data analysis obtained from the experiment with teaching and the results of thematic, textual, stylistic and narrative analyses of the participants' essays. "Action research is becoming increasingly significant in language education" (Nunan, 2002) and since that time its influence has grown. Simpson put "conducting action research" as one of the teaching techniques that "allow the Western EFL teachers to explore the baggage that they have brought to their overseas teaching experiences." (Simpson, 2008: 391) This type of research "seeks to increase the teacher's understanding of classroom teaching and

learning and to bring about improvements in classroom practices."(Snell, 1999) My paper is in line with the current trend of the embedded one-shot case studies conducted by internal observers at the grass root level and also encouraged by an obvious shift in the ESL teaching paradigm from teacher-centrism to learner-centrism (Jacobs, Farrell, 2001). The supplementary methods I utilized are the narrative inquiry of the students' "grammatical problems, lexical density analysis (Ure, 1971; Shokrpour, 2005), systemic analysis of the students' essays (Moghaddam, 2010), error classification (Polio, 1997). The students were taught within the framework of the process-product approach with emphasis on peer-editing (Gearhart, Wolf, 1997; Tompkins, 2003; Hornik, 2010) whereby the students would read and comment on, proof-read and correct each others' essays, then redraft a number of times before the teacher saw and marked the third draft. This scheme of teaching would not only give the students an audience other than the teacher for their writing, give them an understanding of the writing process and sharpen their ability to proof-read and correct their own writing but also save on teacher-marking time. The research questions addressed in this paper are: What overall progress have students made within the short term instructional circle of 6 weeks and the long one of one year within the framework of process-product approach to teaching English Writing? What are points of stagnation learners are still facing?

**3.1 Settings.** I summarized the teaching procedure in the short way in a table following Cheng's sample (Cheng, 2010: 9) Table 1. 6-week Instructional Phase:

Week	In-class Activities	Home Assignments
1. Brainstorm-Outline	Introduction, brainstorming the topic, presentations for their brainstorms, discussion, the teacher's input/summary, write an outline if time permits	50-70 word outline
2. Outline	3-4 presentations of outlines, Q/A session, discussion, corrections of outlines, the teacher's input/summary	1 <sup>st</sup> draft, 200 word essay
3. 1 <sup>st</sup> Draft	individual peer-editing, 3-4 presentations of the 1 <sup>st</sup> drafts, Q/A session, discussion, corrections of drafts, the teacher's input/summary	2 <sup>nd</sup> draft, 200 word essay; peer-editing (optional)
4. 2 <sup>nd</sup> Draft	individual peer-editing, 3-4 presentations of the 2nd drafts, Q/A session, discussion, corrections of outlines, the teacher's input/summary	3rd draft, 200 word essay, typed, printed out; peer-editing (optional)
5. 3 <sup>rd</sup> Draft, typed, printed out	group/class peer-editing of a selected 3 <sup>rd</sup> draft during the presentation of the selected 3 <sup>rd</sup> draft, corrections of the selected 3 <sup>rd</sup> draft, individual peer-editing of the 3 <sup>rd</sup> drafts (later the teacher	next assignment, 50-70 word outline of an essay

	marks it as well as the essay). Brainstorming the next topic if time permits	
6. Return of the marked 3 <sup>rd</sup> Drafts. Start finalizing the 4 <sup>th</sup> draft	the teacher gives the corrected/marked 3 <sup>rd</sup> drafts of the essays back to students, analyzes the essays, if necessary. 3-4 presentations of outlines, Q/A session, discussion, corrections of outlines, the teacher's input/summary.	1) 1st draft, 200 word essay 2) The 4 <sup>th</sup> , final, clean and neat draft goes to the Writing Portfolios

Comments on the 4<sup>th</sup> Drafts: The teacher corrects all the mistakes in the 3<sup>rd</sup> drafts, gives the essays back to students to incorporate the corrections and print out the final, 4<sup>th</sup> draft that goes to the Writing Portfolio. The Portfolio is checked out and assessed at the end of the term. Students write self and peer-evaluations (optional). Assessment criteria for the essays and social notes in portfolios were taken from the Chinese national test for English majors (TEM4).

### 3.2 Data Collection

The timeline of the experiment was the whole academic year of 2008-2009 when students completed seven essays. I've collected 42 drafts of students' essays on social topics, around 200 words each. The essays were written by students in their freshman year. I analyzed particular students' mistakes quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively I codified them as issues of grammar, spelling, word/phrase choice, redundancies (such as rhetorical questions) and sentence structure. Qualitatively I analyzed changes of ideas on the stage between outline and drafts 1,2,3 and also analyzed the authors' logic, the way they handle cultural details, paragraph structure and keywords.

### 3.3 Data Analysis.

#### 3.3 Results within the Long Term (one year) Framework:

3.3.1 Students learned to express ideas in the direct way reducing their L1 influence. Students learned to avoid rhetorical questions in the first paragraph. Student A's Essay "A Good Neighbor" in September. Paragraph 1, draft 1: The beginning was: "So what kind of person can be a perfect one?"

Progress: In the final draft after 4 weeks: rhetorical questions have never appeared in her essays after October up to the end of the year.

3.3.2 Started supporting ideas by giving persuasive reasons and started relating the described events to their own life. At the beginning, there were no examples related to students' daily life. From many essays, starting from the second month, we see phrases which related to their life, such as "a friend of mine", "as we are the students, we should..."

Student A essay "Campus Love" in October.

"A friend of mine was an outstanding student before she had a boyfriend"

Progress: More personalized style has been shaping up. Stagnation: In the form of 200 word essay, it's very hard to diversify their style. They need more creative forms, but the genre approach and genre-based tasks (Yasuda, 2011) (e.g. the TEM4 examination essay) puts limits on their development as writers.

3.3.3 They stated topic sentences in the first paragraph and put forwards the main idea first. Student A's essay *Campus Love* in November. Draft 1, paragraph1: With the advent of Internet, making friends online becomes prevailing. And people hold different opinions about its effect.

Final draft 3, paragraph 1 looks differently: "With the advent of the Internet, making friends online becomes prevailing. I'm lucky that I don't follow the mainstream. I think it has more disadvantages than advantages."

**Comment:** We can also notice that the problem of conjunction "And" at the beginning of sentences was solved in this draft in the 3<sup>rd</sup> month of training. The remark on disadvantages prevailing over advantages is a sign of developing a productive model for this sort of genre-based task.

3.3.4 Students concluded the essays with extended ideas expressed in synonyms to key words. "Lexical variation and sophistication" (Ji, 2009: 386-387) were found in essays. *The Value of Time*, December. Student B: Paragraph 1: "The most precious thing in the world is time. It's much more expensive than gold, because day and night alternate in quick succession. We can never go back to yesterday, so everyone should throw himself into life."

Paragraph 3: God gives everyone 24 hours per day, so it's up to all of us to have a wonderful life if we live actively or we'll regret deeply as we accomplished nothing though we seemingly always on the run. The best we do is to live with all our energy

**Comment:** In the underlined sentences, we can see that the student reiterates her main idea but she uses another expression.

3.3.5 Students started linking their own thoughts to provisional readers (the foreign teacher) and use more detailed sentences to persuade the readers, e.g. wrote explanatory notes for readers which had no ideas of Chinese background, such as years of dynasties.

Student B's essay "My Perception of History" in

November:

“History could be forgiven, but can not be forgotten and future must not be distorted,” said Lian Zhan, a Taiwan government official. Added later in draft 2.

Student C’ essay “*My Perception of History*”

“Franklin was a famous scientist in America. Although it was a dangerous mission, he didn’t give up. He invented the lightning rod”. His action taught me that bravery is an important factor.”

**Comment:** In the underlined sentences, we see that the students started making more convincing detailed comments on their own statements regarding the topic.

3.3.6 Lexical Density - number of lexical word tokens, nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs / Total number of words (Moghaddam, 2010: 160).

It didn’t change significantly as in the first essay in September it was  $M=3.4482$  and at the end of the year  $M=3.6363$ , but the complexity was heavily dependant on the complexity of social topics (such as the comparison where they had to compare two ways of life “*Differences between College Life and Life at High School*”, so the fact that students’ essays became less diversified cannot be taken as a sign of stagnation.

### 3.4 Noticeable Results within the Short Term ( five weeks) Framework. Real Life Examples

Only 5 essays out of 53 contained particular examples in supporting main ideas. Some of them give very general examples. For instance, Student D’s essay “*What is the Good Qualities of Neighbours.*”

“Honesty is a good qualities because they are sincere. I like neighbour who are honest, they will not lie to me.”

Student E: “Kindness is a good quality, because they are easygoing, they are always kind to others. I like people, who are warm-hearted, if I am in trouble they are willing to help”

Only few students write with specific example, e.g.

Student F: “I think warm-heartedness is a good quality, because I have a good neighbour who was very warm-hearted, once I was ill and my parents were not at home, I asked her for help and she sent me to the hospital, called my mom and took care of me. If she didn’t help me that night, I wouldn’t be recovered soon.”

The reason caused this kind of problem is that when they write in Chinese, students do not use specific examples. Compositions in Chinese are based on anecdotes on famous people, but not on what happened in students’ life. So students just started using specific, real life-based, examples in their

essays.

Stagnation: After 5 weeks of practice, most the students are aware of using the specific examples, but they are not familiar with it, so less than 10 % of learners added specific examples to their essays.

## 4. Conclusions and Practical Suggestions

The author utilized the Chinese students’ habit of being assessed by their teachers on every possible test or occasion making it clear to them that their marks will depend primarily on continuous assessment. Marks were given for the essay assignments, peer-editing of those essays in class, presentations of outlines and drafts of essays in class, peer-error-correction in class, self-evaluations, peer-evaluations, writing portfolios at the end of the term. In this situation of tight control of students’ class performance, the visible results within one year of training in English writing that can be attributed to the positive input in writing are not very impressive, but worth noticing: 1) less than 10 % of students learned to use real life examples after the first month of training. 2) they significantly reduced their first language influence and stopped using rhetorical questions and repetitions after the month of training. 3) started giving personalized reasons as supporting ideas and started expressing the main ideas in the first sentence rather than at the end of the first paragraph or later. 4) within 3-4 months of training, they learned how to use specific and real-life experienced based examples making their writing more vivid. 5) started using synonyms and rephrased topic sentences at the end of essays. 6) after 3-4 months of training, they started paying attention to the provisional reader and started explaining major points and commenting on them in detail.

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