



Academic Writing Difficulty of Chinese Students: The Cultural Issue Behind Chinese and British Academic Writing Styles

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Abstract

In the contemporary society, an increasing number of Chinese students pursue higher education in overseas countries. Through the observation of certain Chinese students in the UK, the author found that English academic writing style brought huge obstacles to these learners. Under such background, this study was conducted in order to help these students better adapt to English academic atmosphere. The author reviewed previous studies and noticed that learners' cultural background influenced their writing mode. By the comparison of national cultures and writing styles, it is found that the main differences of Chinese and British academic writing styles exist in students' comprehension of academic argument, the way of utilizing others' achievements, and the structure of academic writing styles.

Key words: Academic writing style; Comparison; Chinese and British national culture

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Higher education in the United Kingdom (UK) has long established reputation and prestige across the world, proved by the annual world university rankings (Times

Higher Education, 2015). China has a significantly large number of students and a tradition of encouraging learning from different cultures. As a result, an increasing number of Chinese students choose to seek higher education and constitute the largest group of international students in the UK (UKCISA, 2015). However, studying in different cultural background, Chinese students often find it hard to settle their learning in the academic English context owing to the fact that "in mainland China, while many universities are becoming more globally oriented, few institutions have established English language centres to provide specific linguistic consultancy for non-native English-speaking students" (Cai, 2013, p.5).

The conventional teaching of English writing in China put great emphasis on grammar drilling but neglects academic writing style (Zhang and Luo, 2004). Therefore, Chinese students are often able to recognise grammar mistakes but have "low academic writing proficiency" and cannot "write acceptable English compositions" (Cai, 2013, p.5). According to Minkov (2010), Chinese and British national cultures are very different. Writers' language and cultural backgrounds may influence their writing (Mauranen, 1993; Moreno, 1997; Golebilowski, 1998; Martin, 2003). The Chinese students have needs for academic English, especially the provision for comprehending the differences between these two writing styles, while studying in the UK. Therefore, this study has been conducted.

Aim of the Study

This essay will examine the following questions:

- (1) What are the main features of Chinese and British national cultures and academic writing styles?
- (2) What are the correlations between these two styles?
- (3) How can Chinese students adapt to the academic English context based on the understanding of these two styles?

This study, firstly, provides an overview of Chinese

and British national cultures and academic writing styles. Then, it discusses their correlations. Finally, it provides advice for Chinese learners to adjust themselves into the academic English context.

1. CULTURE AND WRITING STYLE

Nowadays, a number of individuals prefer to study in overseas countries and seek opportunity for higher education. There is no doubt that these students have various education backgrounds. In other words, they tend to study under different academic styles regarding their preference and experience. Such tendency results in the so-called “Contrastive Rhetoric” phenomenon, which refers to the “linguistic, organisational and presentational choices that multicultural and multilingual student writers make that differ from the choices that native English students make in their written work” (Krampetz, 2005, p.13). This terminology was first used by Robert Kaplan in 1966, when he studied the thought patterns of students from different nationalities and discovered that the international students, who had recently settled in the United States, had very different writing styles and patterns from the native speakers. These newcomers tended to make use of the structures, features and rhetoric methods in their first language. In 1987, he analysed ESL students’ compositions and found that apart from the grammatical and surface matters, they had fundamental dissimilarities including “paragraph order and structure” (Kaplan, 1987, p.277).

Some rhetorical trends and deviations were found by Piper in 1985 when he compared ESL cultural practices with typical Western practices. Other scholars also discovered some trends. “Student writers from Anglo-European languages seemed to prefer linear developments, whereas student-writers from Asian languages seemed to take a more indirect approach, coming to their points at the end of their papers.” (Krampetz, 2005, p.14)

The paragraph development in writing done by students from Afro-asiatic languages tends to be based on a series of parallel organization of coordinate, rather than subordinate clauses, whereas students from Romance and Russian languages tend to prefer extraneous material (Connor, 1997). It can be inferred that a gap between eastern and western cultural exists in higher education. Krampetz (2005, p.56) did a longitude case study of eight international students and found that these participants used their “cultural resources” to build bridge between academic writing and their personal preferences. They were viewed as unique individuals as they had different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In short, there are certain correlations between the cultural aspects and personal writing styles. In the following paragraphs, the author will analyse the Chinese and British national cultures and their typical essay writing styles in order to take a closer look at their

correlations.

1.1 Chinese National Culture

China has a significantly large population (over 1.3 billion), which contributes to its complicated and complex national culture. According to the research of Minkov (2010), China’s national culture was ranked high in collectivism, power distance, masculinity but low in uncertainty avoidance, indulgence culture, which are defined and explained respectively below.

Chinese culture has a high proportion of power distance, up to nearly 80% (Minkov, 2010). Power distance refers to how people accept and react to unequal power (Lakoff, 2002). The Chinese Communist Party owns the power to control the political circumstance, which, somehow, forces or influences the citizens to accept the unbalanced power distribution. Individuals are affected by formal authority and sanctions. Meanwhile, “China is a highly collectivist culture where people act in the interests of the group and not necessarily of themselves” (Minkov, 2010, p.1). From kindergartens to universities, students are taught to focus on the benefits of the whole class rather than themselves. For example, in a company, collectivist culture background affects hiring and promotions with closer in-group members, such as families and friends, who are supposed to receive preferential treatment.

According to Minkov (2010), over 60% of Chinese national culture relates to masculinity (competitiveness, toughness, ambition, achievement). The Chinese old proverb, “you succeed or you die”, reminds every Chinese that achievement is more significant than life. The necessity to ensure success can be exemplified by the fact that many Chinese tend to sacrifice family and leisure time in order to work. Another example is that Chinese students pay very much attention to their exam scores and ranking as this is the main criteria to achieve success.

With regard to Minkov’s research, China has low percentage of uncertainty avoidance and indulgence. Generally speaking, Chinese people are flexible and comfortable with the unknown future. They would rather take measures to deal with the future difficulties instead of preventing it from happening. Chinese people do not put much emphasis on leisure time and in most cases try to control their desires for pleasure. Sometimes they believe that indulging themselves is somewhat wrong.

1.2 Chinese Academic Writing Style

Through the analysis of Chinese national culture, it can be inferred that, as part of the culture, the style of Chinese writing tends to be bottom-up, implicit, pragmatic, and descriptive dominance.

Chinese students tend to follow the bottom-up writing style, a writing pattern which focuses on the importance of background knowledge, and builds global comprehension (Swaffar, Arans, & Byrnes, 1991). For example, they are

likely to write an amount of background information first, then provide examples and evidences, and finally discuss the topic. As far as they are concerned, it is necessary to establish common ground and rapport in the first place and lead readers to the main point later. Therefore, sometimes people find it complicated and confusing to read Chinese compositions, owing to the lack of topic sentences presented at the beginning of paragraphs and the huge amount of information. Some scholars regard the Chinese academic writing style as presenting your ideas through a delicate mist. Kavan and Wilkinson (2004) described Asian academic writing as negotiated by using inference. Chinese academic writing, as a significant element of Asian culture, has the feature of the implicit message of the meaning rather than uses linking words to demonstrate logic and cohesion.

With the implicit message and perspective conveyed by the composition, pragmatics plays a very significant role in readers' comprehension. Pragmatics refers to the study of "relation of signs to interpreter" (Morris, 1938, p.6; Lyons, 1977a, p.119), meaning that the aspects of language meaning largely depend on speaker, addressee, and context. As individuals are different in the thinking process and opinions, they may have various understanding to read an implicit passage, which is largely determined by their situation and context (Minkov, 2010). Chinese people often use the following sentence when meeting someone.

"Have you eaten already?"

This sentence literally means the question to ask whether people have eaten or not. However, it has multiple meanings.

(1) It means greeting when people meet each other but have nothing to say. Therefore, they use this question to break the ice (Qi, 2001).

(2) It means invitation when the questioner is hungry and wants to invite people to have meals together.

Another main feature of Chinese writing is descriptive dominance, which means the degree of authority that students state in their compositions to lead the main idea. In Chinese academic writing, students tend to describe their opinions using a dominant idea in that they are used to China's high uncertainty avoidance culture which welcomes support instead of argument. There is a common discussion in China about whether students should make their essays with dominant perspective and statement. Through my observation and previous experience, I discover that unlike western writing style, Chinese writing tends to have a leading opinion but neglect the other related perspectives. Four years ago, I interviewed my Chinese tutors regarding the university entrance exam. They explained that students, who wrote notions of both sides, often received very low marks in exams. In an argumentation, mentioning opinions of both sides is significantly discouraged. It is expected that learners state a theme in an essay and describe it in details

with supportive ideas rather than argument.

In a society with collective culture, people believe that knowledge is shared among group members and group success is more significant than personal achievement. A number of students in China plagiarise ideas, works, and even sentences in their academic writing in that they believe knowledge should be shared. A very typical example is that students do not make citations in their essays. Those students simply list references in the end, which discourage readers to trust the credibility and fail to see the scientific value.

1.3 British National Culture

The United Kingdom has certain cultural characteristics that differentiate its national culture from other countries. Carrington and Short (1995) did an interesting research on children's perspective of their national culture and identity. Their findings infer that people have different views on cultures and identities in diverse ethnic groups. Though individuals may have different opinions on their identities, there are some common features that make British identities "increasingly fluid" (McCrone, 2002, p. 310). That is how national culture works. With reference to Minkov's study, British national culture scores significantly high in the aspects of individualism, and indulgence, but very low in power distance and uncertainty avoidance.

Individualism plays a significant role in British people's identity. Interdependence is highlighted in the society. People pay very much attention to privacy. From an early age, children are taught to think for themselves, find out their unique character, and achieve personal fulfilment (Minkov, 2010). Through my observation, leisure time places a higher degree of importance to British people, which somehow results in a high score of indulgence in the national culture. They demonstrate their desire and willingness to pursue happiness and enjoy life.

Unlike the above aspect, British people tend to believe inequality exists in the society but needs to be minimised (Minkov, 2010). Traditionally, there used to be three biggest social classes: working, middle and upper classes, which according to BBC (2013) were defined by people's occupation, wealth and education. Social class is likely to be the predictor of educational attainment (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Dyson et al., 2010; National Equality Panel, 2010; Sodha and Margo, 2010). Nowadays, more social classes appear according to their nature of cultural interests and activities, namely, Elite, Established Middle Class, Technical Middle Class, New Affluent Workers, Traditional Working Class, Emergent Service Workers, and Precariat, or Precarious Proletariat (BBC, 2013). However inequality exists, people seek methods to minimise the gap between groups. For example, in the educational context, scholars suggest removing the gap on tuition fees (Browne, 2010). Archer et al. (2003) recommended the analysis of inequalities in the various

education sectors. Similarly, uncertainty avoidance remains to be low in the proportion of British national culture. People are likely to state their own opinions and welcome argument. In the educational context, tutors praise more on different approaches to knowledge and do not expect a completely right answer.

1.4 British Academic Writing Style

Academic writing is one of the major components in the schooling of every student. In academic culture, students in Britain follow a general pattern of writing style. With reference to the relevant studies, the author found that the British academic writing style tended to be critical and argumentative, and appreciated precise references, which often followed a top-down structure (Carter, 2010).

Students in Britain are encouraged to write academically with a top-down format including three main elements, namely, topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence. Topic sentence refers to the sentence telling the main idea of a paragraph. It is appreciated that students build a paragraph with a topic sentence, which “not only names the topic of the paragraph, but it also limits the topic to one specific area that can be discussed completely in the space of a single paragraph” (Hogue and Oshima, 2005, p. 3). Following the topic sentence, students can divide the topic into details and form detailed discussion and analysis by means of supporting sentences. Such sentences contribute to further argument and provide more information to the topic, with which students can end a paragraph by a concluding sentence. The concluding sentence serves to “summarise the argument” and may “lead up to the next paragraph” (Cottrell, 2008, p. 184). This top-down style attaches the importance to each part of the sentences and infers people’s common culture of equality (power distance).

Another typical feature is that teachers highly evaluate students’ ability to think critically and build argumentation in academic writing. The society with significantly high proportion of individualism praises independent thinking (Minkov, 2010), through which students can demonstrate the ability to accept different perspectives and form individual point of view. It is this critical approach that helps students recognise the relevance and connection

among all reasonable inferences (Kurland, 2000) and come up with objective argument. Argumentative writing has become a crucial element and typical feature of academic writing (Wolfe, 2007). By means of viewing the way, in which students build argument, tutors are able to recognise how students’ knowledge and skills are developed after a stage of study. Especially in higher level of study, “most tutors want essays to be analytical, examining ‘What exactly’ and ‘Why exactly’ in detail” (Cottrell, 2008, p. 211). Through objective analysis and argument, students can compare their opinions with multiple perspectives and perfect themselves. This is largely related to the social value of individualism that contribute to personal fulfilment.

As individual interest is respected and protected in the United Kingdom, tutors highly appreciate and strictly require citations and references in academic writing. “Universities treat cases of plagiarism very seriously, and lecturers and supervisors are skilled in detecting plagiarised work” (Poore and Craswell, 2011, p. 60). The act of correct and precise citations not only respects the research of previous scholars, but demonstrate students’ study experience and increase the scientific credibility to their pieces of work, where readers can “trace the geneology of ideas” (Hunter, n.d., p. 2). Since honesty is vital in study and research, reference actually improves the scientific development. In most cases, British students should respect the previous studies and form precise citations in their academic writing.

2. DISCUSSION

Having studied the typical characteristics of different academic writing styles in China and Britain together with their cultural backgrounds, the author has found some features that differentiate these two writing styles, namely, structure, content, and the view of plagiarism. With the aim to better equip Chinese learners with academic writing skills in the UK, the author made comparisons between two aspects and provided appropriate guidance.

2.1 Bottom-up VS Top-down Model

In academic context, these two writing styles actually follow different structures, respectively.



Figure 1
British Academic Writing Style



Figure 2
Chinese Academic Writing Style

As shown in the figures, Chinese learners, in most cases, begin a paragraph with background information and finish with a concluding idea. British writing style, however, includes a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. An obvious and major difference between these two styles, therefore, should be the “topic sentence”. This infers educators to focus on skills and knowledge of how to write a topic sentence when teaching Chinese learners with academic writing. Based on this, Chinese learners should try to write their topic at the first place.

2.2 Description VS Argument

Living in a society with high uncertainty avoidance culture, Chinese students are used to obey and accept the authority without argument, which encourages them to write with descriptions and a dominant idea. Compared to the requirement of academic writing in the UK that welcomes argument, they certainly lack the ability to accept different perspectives and challenge the authority. A necessary way to tackle this issue may be the guidance of “critical thinking”. Besides adopting ideas from different perspectives, they ought to treat the information critically (Poore & Craswell, 2011). It is appropriate for teachers to guide these students to evaluate the strengths and weakness of an article. Forming a personal idea after the evaluation may be even better.

2.3 Contribution VS Plagiarism

In collective culture, Chinese people have been instilled with the view of group success. They consider that group achievement is more important than personal interest. As a result, individual work is viewed to be the contribution of the whole community and can be shared to a great extent. Students have very ambiguous definitions towards the term plagiarism. Although, the Chinese ministry requires universities to use computer programme to check the similarities, students define plagiarism merely as the words count, neglecting the ideas and respect behind these words (Schrock, 2013). Accordingly, students do not put great emphasis on the references and often adopt others’ work without citations. This act is strongly discouraged by tutors in Britain, where personal interest is appreciated.

Teachers should help students make sure the definitions of plagiarism and emphasise the respect to others.

CONCLUSION

Though literature review, the author has found that there existed correlations between culture and writing styles, especially national cultures that affect individuals significantly. In this essay, the author has summed up the main features of Chinese and British national cultures according to Minkov’s national culture research, and the typical academic writing characteristics of both countries. In the end, the author compared these writing styles and provided guidance for educators to help Chinese learners study in the UK.

Chinese national culture has obvious features of high collectivism and uncertainty avoidance. In such society, individuals are affected to emphasise group success and obey the authority. Judgement and argument are often not appreciated. The British national culture, on the contrary, consists of significantly high proportion of individualism and low uncertainty avoidance. People allow and welcome argument, which is a good manner to achieve personal fulfilment from their perspectives. Individual interest is appreciated and respected.

Chinese writing requires students to build background information and end with a concluding sentence. In most cases, students develop their papers with a dominant and describe supporting details, but do not pay attention to citations and have uncertain ideas about plagiarism. Tutors expect to see obedience instead of challenge and judgement. Unlike Chinese writing, in British academic culture, students are appreciated to build argument and follow a top-down writing model with topic sentences. Reference is viewed as a significant means to check the study experience and a protection of personal interest.

Owing to the fact that Chinese learners have formed the biggest group of international students in the UK, educators are supposed to critically investigate the cultural differences to better educate them in British academic context. An effective writing approach for teachers may be explaining the academic writing features in Britain and

emphasising what is expected in the writing.

End Note:

Afro-asiatic languages stemmed from Hamito-Semitic languages that are spoken by over 250 million people in North America. It is divided into six branches, namely, Egyptian, Semitic, Berber, Cushitic, Omotic, and Chadic (Rowan, 2006).

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