



A Study of the Comparison Between English and Chinese Text Patterns and the Implications for English Writing Instruction

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Abstract

Writing plays a very important role in our modern society, and is one essential part of English language skills and communicative competence. However, Chinese students are poor in English writing, partly because they pay more attention to words and grammar, ignoring text and text patterns. This paper introduces text and text patterns, and makes the comparison between English and Chinese text patterns from the macroscopic and microscopic perspectives respectively. Based on the introduction and comparison, the paper puts forward some suggestions for English writing instruction.

Key words: Text; Text pattern; English writing instruction

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INTRODUCTION

Writing plays a very important role in our modern society, and is one essential part of English language skills and communicative competence. However, most Chinese students are poor in English writing. For one thing, it has something to do with traditional writing teaching methods; for another, it is affected by the differences between English and Chinese text patterns. In the process of English writing practice, Chinese teachers and students only lay emphasis on the accuracy of words and the

correctness of grammar, but they pay less attention to the structure and organization of texts. In order to improve students' English writing, it is necessary to make a comparison between Chinese and English text patterns. Here this paper discusses the differences between English and Chinese text patterns and offers some implications for English writing instruction.

1. TEXT AND TEXT PATTERN

1.1 Text

In the field of linguistics research, the meaning of the term "text" varies among different linguists. Some linguists think that "text" is the same as "discourse", and they both refer to spoken and written languages (Hu, 1994). Other linguists distinguish "text" from "discourse". The former is called non-interactive monologue, that is, written language, while the latter is called interactive discourse, that is, spoken language (Huang, 1988). Still other linguists think that the Chinese equivalent of "text" is "篇章", and the Chinese equivalent of "discourse" is "语篇".

Some scholars make the following distinction that discourse is the combination of text and context, while text is the written records of discourse alone. Rather, discourse is dynamic, whereas text is static and is disconnected from context. According to Hu (1994), text can be defined as a linguistic unit or a communicative activity with the following characteristics: meaningfulness, completeness, coherence, cohesion, and communicativeness. From the definition, we can see that the text consists of at least more than one sentence, and it can be a group of sentences or a poem or a passage or a novel. Whether the text is long or short, it must convey complete information and clear meaning.

1.2 Text Pattern

Both written and spoken texts have "organization". The Chinese equivalent of "organization" is "布局谋篇", and

refers to how text is combined and organized according to some principles and orders. Japanese scholar Woosiranre in his book *Speech on Rhetoric* thought: “with regard to one isolated word, there is no organization at all, but as for two words, attention must be given to their organization”. In general, a text consists of paragraphs which consist of sentences that consist of words. It is generally accepted that there are generally four requirements for organization—order, coherence, cohesion, and unity. In other words, text pattern refers to well-established text models with some similar and definite organizations.

There are different text patterns in terms of different communicative purposes and functions. Hu (1994) classified the text pattern from the point of view of style as follows: narrative pattern, argumentative pattern, and scientific pattern. Liu (1999) introduced the classification in terms of meta-text pattern such as problem-solution pattern, claim-counterclaim pattern, narrative pattern, question-answer pattern, general-specific pattern. However, this paper focuses on the differences between English and Chinese text patterns.

2. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND CHINESE PATTERNS

As for the same topic, there are many similarities between English and Chinese text patterns. First, most texts are made up of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Second, they must meet the above-mentioned four requirements—order, coherence, cohesion, and unity. In addition, they both convey complete semantic and communicative information. Finally, they must observe some organization rules, to name just a few. As for the same topic, differences between them are discussed from the following two perspectives:

2.1 The Macroscopic Perspective

The epoch-making research on comparison between text patterns is started by Robert Kaplan, who wrote his paper *Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education* in 1996, in which he formulated a hypothesis that with reference to reading and writing teaching, American learners (native speakers) and learners from foreign countries (non-native speakers) should be taught by means of different methods. Differences in teaching methods are mainly caused by cultural differences. He named this kind of research comparative rhetorics. In his opinion, text pattern or way of organization has the special characteristics of culture and languages, and reflects the thinking patterns of human beings. Through the analysis of semantic structures and ways of text organizations for the same topic, different thinking patterns used by people from different cultural backgrounds may be discovered. Corresponding to English thinking pattern, English text structures are formed in the linear form. In other words, English text pattern begins with a topic sentence that directly states the main

idea of this passage, and then presents several sub-topics that all centers on the topic sentence. In the process of presentation, each sentence is produced on the basis of the previous sentence. For example:

Games and sports often grow out of people's work and activities. In Portugal many people like to catch fish. They fish from their boats. Sometimes they use their boats for racing.

The first sentence is the topic sentence and generalizes the whole paragraph. Then one example from the second sentence to the last one is given to illustrate the topic. The second and third sentences introduce people's work and activities “catch fish from their boats”, and the fourth sentence states that racing as a sport comes from their work. Although there are only four sentences in this short paragraph, the four sentences are logically connected with each other.

On the other hand, Chinese text is presented in a spiral pattern. There are two basic Chinese text patterns: one is similar to English deductive text pattern; the other is spiral Chinese text pattern peculiar to oriental languages. The former presents the whole text in the form of spiral, that is to say, the theme of text is not stated in a direct manner but in a circuitous manner. It is said that this pattern can date back to *baguwen* (eight-part essay, stereotyped writing) times. In Chinese feudal society, scholars wrote this kind of stereotyped essay for being high-ranking officials, so they must be cautious in accordance with politeness principle in pragmatics, that is, they did not state their viewpoint in a direct way but in a roundabout way (Xu, 1992). Here is a dialogue between a Chinese policeman and his British superior. Some differences can be found.

- a. A: Sir?
- b/c. B: Yes, what is it?
- d. A: My mother is not very well, sir.
- e. B: So?
- f. A: She has to go into hospital, sir.
- g. B: Well, go on with it. What do you want?
- h. A: On Thursday, sir.
- i. B: Bloody hell, man, what do you want?
- j. A: Nothing, sir.

In this dialogue, we can see that policeman asks for a leave in an indirect way, typical of this model: presentation+requirement. On the other hand, his superior asks him to say it directly, typical of this model: requirement+presentation, which stresses maxim of relevance in CP (cooperative principles).

2.2 The Microscopic Perspective

In terms of language structuring, Chinese comprehensive thinking pattern leads to understanding and parataxis, while the western analytic thinking pattern leads to reason and hypotaxis. Influenced by different thinking patterns, English is subject-prominent, while Chinese is topic-prominent.

2.2.1 English Text Stressing Hypotaxis

Because of its explicit grammar, language elements (words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs) are connected by various cohesive devices. Conjunctions as connective

devices are widely used in English. In terms of theme + rheme structure, English language presents characteristics of subject prominence, and the basic sentence structure is presented in the form of subject + predicate. Therefore, English is thought to be a formal language. Let's take for example one paragraph of Charles Sanders Peirce's *The Fixation of Belief*:

The subject could hardly be treated, however, without being first limited; since almost any fact may serve as a guiding principle. But it so happens that there exists a division among facts, such that in one class is all those which are absolutely essential as guiding principles, while in the others are all which have any other interest as objects of research.

However demonstrates the change of the topic, and the second coordinate clause introduced by *since* provides explanations for the first coordinate clause. *But* is used for complementing information. *Such that* refers to the anaphora of facts in the above sentence, and *while* marks the distinction between *one* and *others*. Cohesion displays the logical and nonseparable relationship of intrasentence and intersentence. In this paragraph, each sentence is presented in the form of subject + predicate.

2.2.2 Chinese Text Stressing Parataxis

Compared with English grammar, Chinese grammar is implicit, and language elements are connected mainly by some logical devices or reflected indirectly by orders. We can not ignore the fact that there exist conjunctions in Chinese, but it seems that people seldom use them. In terms of theme + rheme, Chinese has the main features of topic prominence (Chen, 1998). Now let's take one paragraph of Zhu Ziqing's *Spring* for example:

(a) 雨是最寻常的, (它) 一下就是三两天. (b) (不过) (你) 可别恼, (你试向外边) 看, (它) (已正在下着) 像花针, 像细丝, 密密地斜织着, (c) (以致于人家的) 屋顶上全笼罩着一层薄烟.

This paragraph can be explained according to three parts (a), (b), and (c). The Chinese characters in the brackets which the original text has omitted are added by the author of this paper. Part (a) omits the personal pronoun. Part (b) omits the transitional information of adversative conjunctions and the markers of the verb tense. Part (c) omits the transitional information of the subordinative relationship. It seems that the structure of the original text is sporadic, but the meaning it conveys is complete and clear, which is achieved by the harmonious and unified relations of intersentences. Chinese sentences emphasize the completeness of meaning. As long as the meaning is complete, some words can be omitted.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH WRITING INSTRUCTION

From the above-mentioned analysis, we can have a good understanding that there are many obvious differences

between English and Chinese text patterns influenced by different kinds of cultural backgrounds and thinking patterns. Famous Chinese linguist Wang Li once pointed out that the effective method in foreign language teaching is to make the comparison between Chinese and foreign languages. Chinglish phenomenon often appears on the part of Chinese EFL learners. If Chinese EFL learners write an English composition in the Chinese thinking pattern, Chinglish will be inevitable. What they write means nothing to native English speakers, though they have a good command of English grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, it is of great necessity for Chinese EFL teachers to take effective measures against this kind of "negative transfer".

First and foremost, Chinese EFL learners should be told to have a good knowledge of English culture and its thinking pattern, and pay special attention to differences between English and Chinese text patterns, and make the comparison between them. Therefore, more culture and text knowledge should be added to students' college English course books. In English classes, teachers should offer students some culture and text knowledge and cultivate students' intercultural and textual awareness.

Secondly, they should be asked to read English original literary works, newspapers, magazines, etc. as many as possible. Exposed to a large number of English materials, they can have a good understanding of English thinking patterns and text patterns. Gradually, they can think in English.

Finally, more English writing exercises should be given to learners to put what they have learned into their writing practice. In the meanwhile, they should be guided to have a good knowledge of English writing diction, rhetoric and organizations.

This paper discusses the differences between English and Chinese text patterns only from the theoretical perspective for the purpose of attracting EFL teachers' attention to the influences of differences on English writing. Much instruction practice will be integrated with it. You are welcome to give some valuable advice.

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