

# The Importance of Application on Culture Teaching in the Chinese College English Writing Class and Some Suggestions

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## **Abstract**

*Writing is an instrument of communication; the Chinese students' English writing belongs to intercultural communication. Of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), writing has always been the most problematic part for Chinese college students and difficult for their teachers to help. From students' English writing we can find that not only linguistic transfer but also cultural transfer can lead to the problem in Chinese students' English compositions. This thesis attempts to highlight the importance of culture teaching in English writing teaching and propose some suggestions from both teachers' and students' perspective.*

**Key words:** English writing, cultural difference, culture teaching

## **1. Introduction**

The importance of culture teaching in writing course has been recognized by Chinese college English teachers in their writing class. Writing is a complex process, and learning to write in a second language is not a simple matter of knowing how to “write things down” in the new code. Writing is an integral part of foreign language development and it needs much practice, so teaching writing is not an easy task

Culture teaching needs to be applied to Chinese college English writing class, and it is supported by the innate closeness of language, culture and thinking, and the inseparable relation between thinking and writing. The lack of intercultural awareness will make the understanding of readers from different cultures frustrating and fraught with misunderstandings.

Of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), writing has always been the most problematic part for Chinese college students and difficult for their teachers to help. Most English writings of Chinese students read so much like translation of Chinese, and one can fairly easily tell whether an article

was written by a Chinese or by a native speaker of English. The biggest problem with the English composition of Chinese college students is that most of them just translate Chinese expressions and writing patterns to English, and usually a word for word translation from Chinese to English. That may account for their inadequacy of linguistic competence and the interference of Chinese writing habit. From students' English writing we can find that not only linguistic transfer but also cultural transfer can lead to the problem in Chinese students' English compositions.

In our teaching experience we can find that when Chinese students write in English they attempt to translate, first language words, phrases, and organization into English. It made their writing very choppy and does not flow. The traditional approach adopted in college English writing class focus on the instruction of linguistic form of grammar and word usage with some explanation of content and structure, while ignoring the cultural aspect related to foreign language writing. Therefore, in order to improve the efficiency of teaching and students' writing, it is necessary for the teachers to pay more attention to the culture teaching in the writing course.

Based on the analyses of the relationship of language, culture and writing, this thesis attempts to highlight the importance of culture teaching in English writing teaching and then give some suggestions from both teachers' and students' perspective.

## **2. The Literature Review of Culture and Language**

### **2.1 The Relationship between Culture and Language**

Culture is a vast topic. It is multidimensional and complicated and definitions of culture range from all-encompassing ones to narrow ones. "Culture consists of all the shared products of human society" (Robertson, 1981). This means culture refers to the entire way of life of a society and the ways of a people. In addition, culture is view as civilization, the great achievements of a people as reflected in their history, social institutions, works of art, architecture, music, and literature—commonly referred to as "big C" culture. Culture is also viewed as the customs, traditions, or practices that people carry out as part of their everyday lives—"small c" culture (Halverson, 1985). Both views are culture-specific, and teachers should pay attention to both "Culture" and "culture" in language teaching.

Language teachers understanding of the components of language will influence their teaching method and determine to a large degree how they teach a language. According to Finchiaro, "Language is a system of arbitrary, vocal symbols which permit all people in a given culture, or other people who have learned the system of that culture, to communicate or to interact" (1964: 8). Language dose not exist in a social vacuum, but is firmly fixed in the way of life, beliefs, practice and value system of its speakers, which is called culture.

Fundamentally, culture teaching is needed in the college English writing course because of the close relationship of language, culture, thought and writing. It is believed that language and culture are inextricably bound to each other. Culture contains language and language is a part of culture. "a society's language is an aspect of its culture... The relation of language to culture is that of part to whole" (Goodenough, 1957: 67). On the one hand, culture contains language and has strong influence on it. On the other hand, language reflects culture and traces of culture are found in the language.

Hu Wenzhong (1988: 97) use the term *cultural mistakes* to refer to language and behavior that is inappropriate or unaccepted to most native speakers, and he considers that cultural mistakes are often worse than linguistic ones and tend to create ill feeling between speakers from different cultures. Therefore, a language learner can have a real command of a foreign language only when he knows its culture. In addition, some languages are used in more than one country, so in different English-speaking countries cultures are different. Each of these countries belongs to a culture that is somewhat different from the others, in spite of their common language. So learners need to pay much attention to different cultural backgrounds in English learning.

## **2.2 The Relationship of Writing and Culture**

From the beginning of last decade on, language teachers and researchers became increasingly aware of the role of writing in L2 learning. Written language is different from spoken language. “Spoken language is primarily an innate, biologically determined ability; writing, on the other hand, according to Kaplan, is a ‘post-biological’ step and obviously is not universal to all people. It is, he claimed, the invention of literacy that allows the search for truth in terms of cultural universals and particulars” (Ulla Connor, 2001, 100). He also mentioned that, “Most significantly, research points to the fact that written texts and the ways they are used vary according to cultural group” (2001, 100). So we can regard writing as an activity embedded in a culture. College English writing course surely needs to stress the cultural aspect, especially in the light of the nature of writing.

Culture is an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Writing is the externalization of thinking, and it is also the instrument of expressing thought. Writing begins with one’s perception of things and the perception is processed into thought in the brain. In the process of writing, it is impossible to exclude thought. Therefore, writing and thought are inseparable in communicating in the written form by nature. Since writing externalization thought, which is inseparable from language and culture, it is essential to emphasize the role of culture teaching in college English writing course.

Since 1960s, ESL teachers began to probe the nature of L2 writing and they find that L2 writing is strongly influenced by native language and culture. Each language has its rhetoric conventions that are unique to it. It is important to awake the awareness of both teachers and students that conventions are culture-specific. Most language educators unanimously agree that the best way for learners to achieve native-like control of and an L2 is to make an effort to think in that language rather than to translate or reprocess the material into their L1 (Cohen, 1998). It can help students avoid the negative influence of native language and culture in L2 writing.

## **2.3 The Cross-cultural Aspects of L2 Writing**

Chinese culture and cultures of English speaking countries are widely different branches of language. Those differences between two languages and cultures frequently lead to Chinglish, which refers to expressing in English words but in Chinese way. So, in order to improve students’ writing, teachers have to take the cultural dimensions of transfer in relation to writing into consideration, and regard writing as a cultural activity.

The cross-cultural aspects of L2 writing have been investigated from the perspectives of anthropology, psychology and education. In the psychological investigations of culture and writing, a study by psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, *The Psychology of Literacy* (1981), was designed to examine the cognitive consequences of literacy and compare the effects of different scripts. Their research is significant for contrastive rhetorical research in two ways: “First, it shows that although some literacy groups are less skillful at certain cognitive tasks, one should not draw an overall conclusion concerning these people’s way of thinking or their ‘thought patterns’... Their research proves that the appearance of writing in itself does not substantially change the quality of culture” (Ulla Connor, 1996: 104).

In the educational study of culture and literacy, significant contributions to culture and writing instruction have emerged from the International Study of Written Composition as part of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) (Gorman, Purves, and Degenhart 1988). Ulla Connor (1996: 112) concluded that the work conducted in the IEA project is significant in expanding contrastive rhetoric in three important directions:

“First, the sample writing in the IEA project was in the students’ mother tongues, allowing for a more direct discussion of cross-cultural differences. Second, the sample sizes were large enough to allow statistical inferences and generalizations. Third, the project saw the importance of going beyond static linguistic and discourse analyses for learning about the cross-cultural conventions of writing.”

We can see that the interest and research in cultural literacy have produced important insights about cross-cultural aspects of L2 writing, and these researches conducted by psychologists, educational researchers and anthropologists. However, there are more and further explorations need to be made about the relationship between culture, writing and L2 instruction.

### **3. The Present Teaching and Learning in the Chinese College English Writing Class**

#### **3.1 A Brief Contrast between the Languages of Two Cultures**

As author mentioned in former part, language is a part of culture and plays a very important role in it. And with difference in cultures and differences in languages, difficulties often arise in communication between cultures and across cultures. Therefore, the cultural difference between China and West, which causes the differences in the two languages, certainly would lead to the communication difficulties. Since writing is also an instrument of communication, the cultural difference causes the cultural mistakes in Chinese college students’ English writing.

China is a high-power-distance country, and Chinese people believe that power and authority are facts of life. People’s honorable titles indicating the position show the social power hierarchy, so when greeting somebody, they intend to bringing official titles and other positional appellation. Whereas in the West, people consider equality and they prefer to give the title Mr. and Ms before the family name. For example, in one student’s writing, she used “*Principal Tim*” instead of “Mr. Tim”, and this cultural mistake in her writing is caused by the different value orientation between the two cultures.

Except for the different value orientation between the two cultures, there are various language differences between Chinese and English, which are caused by the cross-cultural differences. There are differences of meaning of words, cultural distinctions and connotations, idioms, proverbs, sayings, metaphor and association, allusions, euphemisms taboos and so on, and all these language differences may cause

cultural mistakes in Chinese students' English writing

Idioms, proverbs and sayings are an important part of the language and culture of a society. As with idioms in any language, the meanings of Chinese and English idioms cannot be derived from the meanings of the individual words alone, and they are impossible to understand from the meanings of the individual words. For example, in one student's sample writing, he translated the Chinese proverbs to "*every family has a difficult book to read*", and "*people are iron, rice is steel*". Although the translation are correct in grammar, but such English expression can not be understood by English native speakers, because they lack of the similar cultural background of China. "The problems of rendering idioms and proverbs of one language into another are always complex, much more so if the two languages involved are of backgrounds and cultures so unlike each other" (Deng Yangchang and Liu Runqing, 1989: 40)

### **3.2 Insufficient Learning of Students and Insufficient and Improper Teaching**

Students' ideas on English writing, their writing habits and their language proficiency are related to their cultural competence in English writing. Most Chinese college students think the vocabulary and grammar are the most difficult in English. There are little of them aware of difficulties caused by the cultural difference in English writing. Some students regard there is only little cultural difference among different nations, and think that there is only little influence of cross-cultural difference on English writing. In their opinion the vocabulary is the most difficult part in English writing and they think of it most, and their emphasis is also spelling when check the writing. Therefore, the unawareness and the confused understanding of cultural difference among languages certainly would cause the cultural mistakes in English writing. Besides, the proper writing habits, such as paying enough attention to the cultural barrier and think more about culture except for vocabulary and grammar in the process of writing and assessing, would help to reduce the cultural mistakes in English writing.

Teachers' English writing teaching have influence on students' opinions on English writing and their writing habits. In the English writing process of students, what they value most and regard the most difficult are consistent with the teachers' emphasis in English writing classes. In a long-term period, Chinese English teaching aims at introducing more grammatical points and the students' purpose is to cope with the test, which leads to insufficiency of the target culture presentation. Most of teachers usually do not value culture introduction in English writing course and pay little attention on it. Teachers pay much attention on the vocabulary and sentence structure and proper arrangement. On the impact of teachers' English writing teaching, most students only put emphasis on vocabulary and grammar and neglect the cultural mistakes in writing, although many of them are aware of the cultural differences among different languages.

What's more, there are some words, phrases, idioms, proverbs, sayings, metaphor, association, allusions, euphemisms and taboos in English, especially related to a certain cultural implication are intractable for Chinese students. But when teaching vocabulary and so on, teachers always ignores culture-loaded meaning of some words and phrases. When facing a certain word or phrase with some cultural background, teachers usually introduce the pronunciation, spelling and grammatical usage, but ignore the introduction and explanation of the cultural background knowledge and cultural differences between two languages. In all, the cultural mistakes in Chinese students' English writing are always caused by several factors. And these factors are only the central ones as a complicated intertexture but not the all.

#### **4. Some Suggestions on Culture Teaching in English Writing Class**

How to teach culture is still a problem faced by the language educators and teachers. Most of students have a confused understanding of cross-cultural differences and pay little attention to the cultural mistakes in their English writing. Therefore, it is very important for teacher to make students have a clear understanding of cultural differences and its influence on English writing.

Reading is the foundation of writing. In order to help cultivate students' cultural awareness, teachers may acquaint them with the English writing style and thought of native speakers through reading critically. In English writing class, teachers should train the students' ability of critical reading by contrasting writing styles, thought patterns and using of proverbs or idioms between Chinese people and native English-speakers. By contrasting those two patterns, the students' cultural awareness between Chinese and English will be raised. Besides, teachers should explain the root of differences, and then the students can better understand the features of English in writing and thinking so as to improve their sensitivity to cultural difference in thought pattern, writing style and language use. Moreover, teachers should ask the students to notice those differences when they read other English articles to enhance their awareness of the characteristic of English.

The reading material chosen for students would better be concerned with typical laws, morality, and social phenomena of certain Western countries which are different from China. After reading the given essay, teachers can design some tasks to check whether the students correctly understand the essay, such as writing a summary and a speech for classroom discussion. Finally, teacher should give students freedom in selecting a topic or theme related to the reading material for their own essays, and each student may choose a specific topic about which he feels strongly or has something he really wants to say.

By applying the proposed suggestions, teachers will be better able to help the students acquaint with thought patterns of native English speakers and their writing styles and guide them to write quality English compositions.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Owing to the close relationship between language and culture, culture teaching is necessary in Chinese college English writing classes. In a sense, teaching language is teaching culture. Unexceptionally in the college writing class, which aims at helping students to write acceptable and appropriate English compositions, culture teaching is indispensable. Writing is an instrument of communication, and a competent intercultural communicator should know how to integrate grammatical points with social rules to send meanings.

Students' comparatively low level of cultural competence in English writing is mainly because of their insufficient or vague understanding and recognition of the target culture. Therefore, enhancing culture teaching and put more emphasis on cultural mistakes in English writing class is of great importance. Then several suggested implications for pedagogy and some perspectives based on the analysis of causes are discussed for both teachers and students to develop students' English writing competence. Thinking of the present situation of the college English writing course, we believe that the adoption of these suggestions will contribute to improving the efficiency of traditional classes.



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