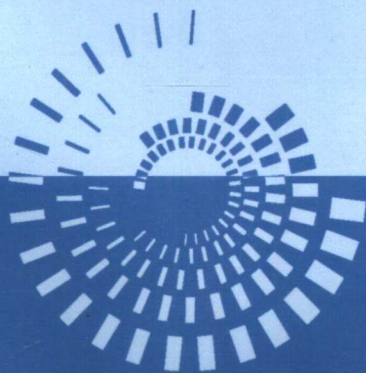# 英语语言学与教学丛书

丛书主编◎蔡龙权

中国专业英语学生写作能力研究

Development in EFL Writing of Chinese English Majors

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上海市高等学校教育高地英语项目

英语语言学与教学丛书

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Development in EFL Writing
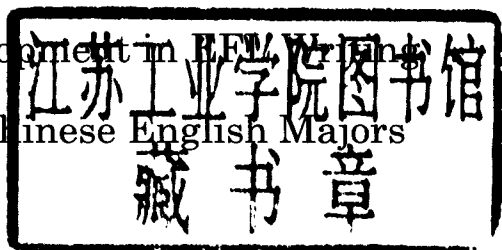## of Chinese English Majors

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Preface

Following the international boom in L2 writing research, researchers in the Chinese context have been producing a growing number of studies addressing the writings of Chinese learners of English. While many studies conclude that Chinese learners of English are particularly weak at writing, most of them are, among other things, by no means empirical studies supported by data and statistical tests. The present study aims to fill this gap by providing an objective picture of the writing proficiency of Chinese learners of English from a developmental perspective and to identify factors that contribute to successful writings.

To examine the developmental features of the writings, 100 subjects from four institutions (Fudan University, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai Normal University, and Shanghai University of Science and Technology) are chosen whose TEM4 2003 and TEM8 2005 compositions are coded for linguistic features like fluency, syntactic complexity, lexical complexity, formality, and accuracy and also rated holistically. It is hypothesized that the TEM8 compositions will witness an improvement over the TEM4 compositions in all those measures.

The empirical tests show that the subjects do make statistically significant improvement in TEM8 compositions in the aspects of fluency, lexical complexity and formality. The minor improvement in syntactic complexity and overall rating

of their writings fail to receive statistical support. On the other hand, statistically significant decline is reported for the measure of accuracy. To explain the decline in accuracy and poor performance in composition ratings, institutional performances are also examined, which produces some interesting findings. Subjects from Fudan U, in contrast to those from the other three institutions, make some minor improvement in accuracy, and, more importantly, significant improvement in holistic rating of their TEM8 compositions. Learners from Shanghai University of Science and Technology also demonstrate some minor improvement in the overall quality of their writings. Many variables contribute to the institutional differences in performance, and the present study examines the role of the variable of curriculum design—whether the writing course is offered after TEM4 is taken. A regression model is run and the results show that both TEM4 composition ratings and the presence or absence of writing course after TEM4 are important variables contributing to performance in TEM8 writing.

To identify features of successful writers, a questionnaire, which is based on the findings of relevant studies, was administered to learners from Fudan University and Shanghai Normal University shortly after TEM8 2005. Respondents are asked to identify features of writing that apply to them. The answers from 44 respondents are used for analysis. The results indicate that those who write good TEM8 compositions share a number of features; they tend to have good English proficiency, practice writing more, do a lot of reading in English, generate ideas in English when writing compositions, and focus more on content and word choices in writing. Similar conclusions have

been arrived at in other studies. To further test the effect of these contributing variables, a regression model is run, which shows it is the general English proficiency that plays a significant role in explaining the performance in TEM8 compositions.

The findings from the present study have some implications for the design of TEM writing tasks and language teaching. Given that learners' performance is more homogenous in TEM4 compositions, it is suggested that test designers for TEM4 raise the length requirement to 250 or 300 words, a requirement comparable to that of the writing task in TOEFL and IELTS. In language teaching, more emphasis should be put on encouraging learners to do more reading and on the integration of reading and writing.

The completion of the dissertation was made possible by the help and encouragement I received from various people. First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my advisor Prof. Zou Shen for her guidance. An expert in the testing field, Prof. Zou embodies all the features of a great advisor; she is responsible, patient, encouraging and inspirational. Every discussion with her proves fruitful, and her influence is obvious throughout the following pages. However, for all errors, I am responsible. A special recognition goes to Dr. Shi Ling and Dr. Xi Zhongen, who have given me valuable suggestions concerning research methodology and the statistical tests used in the present study. I want to thank Prof. Xu Wu and Mr. Zhang Wei, who helped me rate and code the compositions. My appreciation goes to Test Administration Office, National Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board

for the data included in the analysis. My colleagues at Shanghai Normal University, Prof. Cai Longquan, Dr. Dai Xiaodong, Prof. Li Yongning and Prof. Xiao Chunlin have been very supportive and encouraging to my study and dissertation writing. I have benefited a lot from discussions with them, and for this I am thankful. Finally I want to express my heartfelt appreciation to my family members—my parents, my parents in law, and my sister, for their love, support and belief in me. Particular thanks go to my husband, who has been very supportive and has taken time to proofread some of the chapters.

Contents

Chapter One
Introduction

1.1 The importance of writing in the test of language proficiency

Traditionally seen as one of the four basic skills of second language (L2)[1] learning, writing always occupies an important position in language teaching and testing. As is reviewed in Spolsky (1995), essay writing was one of the two test formats during the pre-scientific period of language testing, the other being translation. In the 1920s, a new type of tests—objective tests—made its debut in the United States. During this period, priority was given to objectivity. Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), for instance, adopted the form of error correction to test writing ability. In recent years, however, with

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[1] To be consistent with the literature of second language writing (L2 writing), the current study uses second language as a general term embracing both second language and foreign language.

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Bachman's (1990) advocacy for communicative competence and accordingly for communicative language testing, writing again becomes a vital part in various tests.

A survey of the internationally recognized proficiency tests lends support to the significance of writing to L2 learners. The TOEFL Internet-based test (TOEFL IBT), unleashed worldwide in 2006, features two writing tasks: one integrated and one independent[2]. The writing section accounts for 25% of the total score. International English Language Testing System (IELTS) also assigns two writing tasks: an analysis of a chart, or a table or others and a composition about an argument[3]. Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB), a test to measure proficiency in advanced-level language skills for admission to English-medium colleges and universities[4], also has composition as one of its three-part test.

Similarly, writing has always been an integral and important part in China's nationwide English tests, accounting for 23.33%[5], 15%, 15% and 20% of the English test of University Entrance Examinations, College English Test Band 4 and 6 (CET4 and CET6), Test for English Majors Band 4 (TEM4) and Test for English Majors Band 8 (TEM8) respectively. Given the importance of writing in language proficiency, it should come as no surprise that the past two or three decades have witnessed growing interest in the study of writing both home and abroad.

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[2] See http://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEFL/pdf/TOEFL_Tips.pdf.

[3] See http://www.ielts-test.com/writing.htm.

[4] See http://www.lsa.umich.edu/eli/testing.htm

[5] In the English test paper of 2005 University Entrance Examination writing is tested in two parts: proofreading and writing, which together account for 35 points out of 150 points.

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1.2   Growing Attention to Writing as a Research Discipline

It was not until the 1960s that the formal study of L2 writers, writing and writing instruction first made its appearance (Matsuda *et. al* 2003). In 1992 the inception of *Journal of Second Language Writing* apparently served as a highlight of the importance of L2 writing as a research discipline. In the past decade or so a number of books on L2 writing have been published, including Kroll (1990), Hamps-Lyons (1991), Grabe and Kaplan (1996), Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki and Kim (1998), Silva and Matsuda (2001), Weigle (2002), Hyland (2002), and Kroll (2003). According to Silva and Matsuda (2001), by 2001 there had been over 400 doctoral dissertations on the issue of L2 writing.

Wang and Sun (2005, p.11), in a comprehensive review of L2 writing research in overseas countries, identified seven areas of research in the field. The list is based on the guidelines for paper submission to *Journal of Second Language Writing*:

- personal characteristics and attitudes of L2 writers,
- L2 writers' composing processes, and features of L2 writers' texts,
- readers' responses to L2 writing,
- assessment/evaluation of L2 writing,
- cultural, socio-political, situational contexts for L2 writing, and
- L2 writing instruction.

Domestically a growing number of studies have been done addressing the writing performance of Chinese learners of English, both university English majors and non-English majors. Yao and Cheng (2005) gave a review of papers on writings of Chinese learners of English published in seven leading journals since 1980. It was found that the number of papers published from 1990 to 2003 was 6 times that published in the 1980s. They (p.6-7) concluded six research topics, namely:

- prevailing problems in English writing,
- factors affecting English writing,
- factors leading to the minor position of writing in English teaching,
- comparative analysis of features between Chinese and English discourse,
- teaching methodology in English writing, and
- assessment and testing of English writing.

You (2004), in a report written for *Journal of Second Language Writing* on EFL writing in China, identified the following five research areas:

- classroom instruction and assessment (an area that attracts nearly half of the papers addressing L2 writing),
- new methods in the teaching of writing (self-correction of composition, computer-supported interactive writing, Web-based writing instruction),
- characteristics of Chinese students' writing,

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- Chinese literacy and English writing, and
- EFL writing and ESL writing.

One research topic is missing from both Yao and Cheng's (2003) and You's (2004) survey studies, which concerns the general quality or some specific aspects of the written products of Chinese learners of English. This research area has actually received enough academic attention (Yang 1993, Pan 1992, Jiang 1995, Zhang et al. 1995, Huang 1996, Zou 1999, Cai 2002, Song and Xia 2002, Ye 2002, etc.), and most of the studies done so far conclude that the writing proficiency of Chinese learners of English tends to lag behind the general English proficiency, be they English majors or non-English majors. Problems in their writings range from a high frequency of grammatical errors, lack of logical connection between sentences to inadequacy in the use of details to support theme sentences. However, as these studies are troubled with one weakness or another, a systematic study of the English writings of Chinese learners deserves our attention, as a better understanding of Chinese learners' English writings will certainly prove helpful to both language learners and instructors.

The present study aims to fill this gap by examining the development features of the writings of English majors in China. Moreover, the study also attempts to explore factors that affect L2 writing, a topic extensively studied in other countries but rarely touched upon in the Chinese context (with the exception of Ma and Wen 1999, and Yang 2002).

1.3 Purpose and significance of the present study

The present study tries to present a general picture of the writings of English majors and a portrait of successful English writers. More specifically, by examining the TEM4 and TEM8 compositions of 100 English majors, the study expects to identify the general development features in English writing performance and to explore some explanatory variables contributing to proficiency in writing.

This research differs from studies of L2 writing in the existing literature in a few aspects and therefore has its originality. First, as the study compares the 100 students' TEM4 and their TEM8 writings, it is therefore longitudinal in nature. Most studies concerning L2 writing are survey studies, examining the compositions or the composing process of a group or several groups of learners at a certain time point: Yang (1993), Pan (1992), Jiang (1995), Cai (2002), Yang (2002) in the Chinese context, and Zamel (1983), Cumming (1989), Sasaki and Hirose (1996), Grant and Ginther (2000), Jarvis *et. al* (2003) in other countries. A few others are cross-sectional in nature, like Wen, Ding and Wang (2003) examining the features of formality in the writings of English majors of all four class years at Nanjing University. Internationally only a very few longitudinal studies have been done, like Shaw and Liu (1998), who examined the written products of foreign language writers in the UK at two different time periods and Sasaki (2004), whose study focused on Japanese learners of

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English.

A longitudinal approach has its significance, particularly in the Chinese context. Nationwide English tests at different stages of education all feature a section testing writing ability. As learners further their study of English, we expect their writing proficiency to improve, but this kind of expectation has never been put to empirical test. At the same time, the literature is never short of studies concluding that Chinese learners of English are most weak in writing (Pan 1992, Yang 1993, Huang 1996, Zou 1999, among others). It is therefore time to track the development of a group of learners to get a better understanding of their writing proficiency.

Second, the present study is original in research methodology in that it attempts to combine objective measures with subjective measures in assessing writing proficiency. Relevant studies done in the Chinese context usually evaluate writing proficiency either subjectively or objectively, and they fall into the following types: a) generalizations based on personal thoughts (Pan 1992, Jiang 1995), b) conclusions based on researchers' personal experience of composition rating (Yang 1993, Zou 1999), c) corpus-based studies examining features of the learners' written products (Du 2001, Zhang 2002), and d) corpus-based comparison of the written products between Chinese learners of English and native English speakers (Ma 2002, Wen, Ding and Wang 2003).

Arriving at conclusions about writing proficiency on the basis of the researcher's personal reflections is anything but scientific. An examination of the linguistic features of written products tends to be more objective, but can be misleading as well, since scoring highly in one feature (formality, for instance)

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does not necessarily entail high proficiency in writing. A combination of the objective approach and a subjective holistic or analytic rating method can ensure a more comprehensive judgment of the writing proficiency.

This study employs the objective measures of fluency, syntactic complexity, lexical complexity, formality and accuracy widely applied in the literature to examine the development of writing proficiency. Examining all these features together is something rarely done in the field of L2 writing; Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaski and Kim (1998) pointed out that almost no studies other than Casanave (1994) had compared all these four measures for one population of learners. At the same time, the samples for the present study are also evaluated holistically for their overall quality.

Third, the present study features a relatively large number of subjects from heterogeneous backgrounds. Most L2 writing researches so far are relatively small in sample size with subjects coming from the same institution. This is especially true with those process-based case studies (Raimes 1987, Zamel 1983, Wang and Wen 2002). Even some product-based quantitative research fails to employ a large sample: 66 subjects in Yang (2002), 70 subjects in Sasaki and Hirose (1996), 79 subjects in Janopoulo (1986), with the exception of Ma and Wen (1999) with 133 subjects and Wen, Ding and Wang (2003) with 240 subjects. The limited sample size and the homogeneous nature of the subjects pose a problem when researchers try to generalize their conclusions. The present study attempts to look at 200 essays composed by 100 English majors from four different institutions, which will enable the researcher to present a more comprehensive picture