
**EFL Writing and Theory Building in L2 Writing**

**Abstract:** Does EFL writing have a history? Isn’t EFL writing the same as, or similar to, ESL writing? Why bother to study EFL writing? These are questions often asked in the field of L2 writing. In this presentation, I suggest that there are multiple histories of EFL writing if we consider how EFL writing took place in different nation-states. Using the early years of English writing instruction in China as an example, I highlight major differences between EFL writing in China and ESL writing in the United States. Over the last decade, a growing number of studies have focused on English writing in EFL contexts. I suggest, taken an ecological approach, EFL writing can help to correct the unhealthy dominance of a reductionist epistemology in L2 writing, and contribute to the rise of a more inclusive, ethic theory of L2 writing.

Four years ago, Xiaoming Li and I were sitting together at a banquet organized by the Symposium on Second Language Writing held at Purdue. Xiaoming asked me what I was doing for my dissertation. I said, “I am writing about the history of English writing instruction in China.” Xiaoming looked a little surprised. She said, “Oh, China also teaches English writing. I don’t know that. But why will anyone in the U.S. want to hire you if you study English writing instruction in China?” At that time, I was not sure what to say. But I was quite disturbed and disappointed, because I would have no future if I study this topic. In the last four years, I have been thinking about our conversation.

In this conversation, I think, Xiaoming raised three important questions not only for me, but also for the field of L2 writing. First, does EFL writing have a history? Second, isn’t EFL writing the same as, or similar to, ESL writing? Third, why bother to study EFL writing in the field of L2 writing? Today I would like to share with you my thoughts on these questions.

*Does EFL writing have a history?*
Yes, actually I would say it has multiple histories. For my dissertation research, I studied the history of English writing instruction in Chinese colleges from 1862 to 2004. It is just one of the histories, if we study how EFL writing took place in different nation-states. Regarding the beginning of English writing instruction in China, please allow me to share with you some key points. After China lost two opium wars to the Western powers in 1840 and 1860, the government started to allow foreign languages and Western subjects to enter Chinese schools. The central government established the first foreign language school in Beijing in 1862, teaching English as well as French, Russian, German, and Japanese. Soon a few other foreign-language and technical schools were established in some coastal cities. In those schools, students focused on studying English language and technical knowledge through English textbooks, and they learned how to translate English-language technical books and documents into Chinese. For the first time, Chinese students learned English writing and were exposed to the Western rhetorical tradition, particularly scientific rhetoric as manifested in science and technology textbooks. At that time, these students were studying in a monolithic educational system that emphasized reading Confucian classics and writing “eight-legged” essays in order to pass the civil service examinations. Thus, it was when Chinese sovereignty and dignity was threatened by Western powers that Chinese students had to learn both Chinese and English writing.

Systematic English writing instruction in Chinese colleges can be traced to the turn of the 20th century. In foreign mission colleges, equal emphasis was placed on English literature and composition; while in some state universities, translation was also emphasized, thus revealing a nationalistic project, that is, to expose more Chinese people to Western learning through translated works so as to build a strong nation. Although English writing instruction received varying degrees of emphasis in state and private schools, in the 1910s their pedagogies were all unified under what now we call current-traditional rhetoric. In this rhetoric, writing was taught as a scientific subject, and it was analyzed at different levels of the language structure. Discourse was classified into description, narration, exposition and argument. Written products were valued over writing process, which was usually treated as a linear process in composition instruction (Berlin). Why current-traditional rhetoric dominated English writing instruction at that time? First, both state and private schools used composition textbooks mostly imported from the United States, which were saturated by current-traditional rhetoric. Second, by that time theories about current-traditional rhetoric had already begun to appear in Japan and China, and were being gradually adopted in Chinese composition instruction. In primary and middle schools, the four modes of written discourse, i.e.,
description, narration, exposition, and argumentation, began to structure Chinese writing instruction in the late 1910s, and were theorized by some Chinese composition scholars within the Chinese literary and rhetorical tradition. Therefore, when college students started learning how to compose in English, they had already written the four types of composition in their mother tongue in high schools and became familiar with some Western rhetorical styles.

So there is a history about EFL writing in China, which started more than a hundred years ago. Similar things also happened in the Philippines, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Turkey at the turn of the 20th century.

 Isn’t EFL Writing the Same as, or Similar to, ESL Writing?

In L2 writing, many studies have been conducted in the EFL context. These studies can be roughly divided into two groups. The first group emphasizes and explores the EFL context in English writing, while the second group does not. Today, I want to focus on the first group of studies, which consciously identify themselves as EFL writing research. The number of those studies increased quite significantly in the last few years. Some have researched how Anglo-American writing pedagogies were introduced, negotiated, and received in non-English dominant countries, such as China, Turkey, Russia, and Thailand (Clachar, 2000; Cummings, 2003; Tarnopolsky, 2000; You, 2004a, 2004b). Some have observed how English writing was taught in European school systems (Reichelt, 1997, 2005). Others have explored the socio-political ramifications of English writing in EFL contexts, such as China, India, and Sri Lanka (Canagarajah, 2002a; Ramanathan, 2003; Shi, 2002; You, 2005). So what can these studies tell us about EFL writing.

Studying EFL writing as an educational enterprise and a cultural phenomenon taking place in various socio-cultural exigencies, these studies tell us that L2 writing does not mean ESL writing only, nor does it mean ESL writing in the United States. Using my dissertation research as an example, the beginning of English writing instruction in China shows us several major differences between EFL writing in China and ESL writing in the United States. 1) EFL writing started in China more than a hundred years ago because of the pressure of Western imperialism and the rise of Chinese nationalist consciousness. ESL writing started in the US because of the increasing number of international students in American colleges in the first half of the 20th century (Matsuda, 2005). 2) When EFL writing was initiated in the country, China had its own tradition of rhetoric and
writing. So students had to study both Chinese and Anglo-American ways of writing at the same time. For a long time, ESL writing means that international students learn the Anglo-American rhetorical style only. 3) Because of the contact with Western scientific rhetoric, current-traditional rhetoric made its way into Chinese writing instruction. So later when students learned to write in English, they had already become familiar with English written modes to some extent. 4) English writing in China means both essay writing and Chinese-to-English translation. Students improve their English writing through these two major exercises. ESL writing traditionally only focused on essay writing in the United States. 5) The entire history of English writing instruction in China, from 1862 to present, is in close connection with the Chinese modernization project. In contrast, ESL writing in the United States worked under the hegemony of a nationalistic and imperialistic discourse, turning the US into, according to Paul, “the state of English Only, in which students are native English speakers by default.” Taking place in a context different from the United States, EFL writing entails different historical and cultural reasons for its existence, students struggling with a different set of issues, and the possibility of different teaching methods and different pedagogical theories developed by local writing teachers. These are the aspects that we need to keep in mind when talking about L2 writing in historically non-English dominant countries.

Why bother to study EFL writing in L2 writing?

EFL writing research benefits L2 writing studies in many ways. One of them that I want to highlight today is its contribution to theory building in L2 writing. Over the last decade, an increasing interest has been expressed in building a general theory for L2 writing. Recently, William Grabe (2001) seconded Alister Cumming’s call for developing a predicative model of the writing construct, “one that would predict relative difficulty of performance based on task, topic, and writer knowledge and one that would predict general stages of writing development” (p. 48). This is a recent effort in theory building in L2 writing. Grabe suggests a hierarchy of writing outcomes based on a general purpose hierarchy as listed below:

1. Writing to control the mechanical production aspect (motor coordination, minimal fluency).
2. Writing to list, fill-in, repeat, paraphrase (not composing, only stating knowledge).
3. Writing to understand, remember, and summarize simply and extended notes to oneself (composing and recounting).
4. Writing to learn, problem solve, summarize complexly, synthesize (composing and transforming, composing from multiple sources).

5a. Writing to critique, persuade, interpret (privileging perspectives and using evidence selectively but appropriately).

5b. Writing to create, an aesthetic experience, to entertain (composing in new ways, figurative levels of composing, violating composing norms in effective ways). (p. 50)

He explains that, “Most things being equal, one needs to be able to have production fluency in order to list and paraphrase. One needs to be able to list, repeat, and paraphrase ideas well in order to write simple summaries, write to understand, and write to remember. One needs to be able to summarize simply, write to understand and remember reasonably well in order to be able to write complex summaries, engage in problem solving, learn from texts, and synthesize information…” (p. 50). Further, he suggests, “these levels of purpose difficulty can be manipulated to some extent to control for other factors and to generate variability in writing” (p. 51). The desire to develop a writing construct that is able to predict and control the written production should not surprise anybody in TESOL. Taking a social science approach to studying human interaction, a major part of L2 writing research has assumed a reductionist epistemology. It considers L2 writing taking place in a socio-cultural vacuum; writing act can be dissected into variables. By identifying independent variables and dependent variables, we can predict and control writing acts. Of the two groups of studies conducted in EFL contexts, that I just mentioned, the second group does not want to emphasize the EFL context, because they work exactly with this epistemology. This epistemology has been challenged by scholars in L2 writing, such as Suresh Canagarajah in his book *Critical Academic Writing and Multilingual Writers* (2002).

The first group of EFL writing research, on the other hand, further challenges the limitations of this epistemology in L2 writing. Instead of seeking to establish a reductionist theory, EFL writing research will help to establish an ecological theory for L2 writing. Reductionist thinking holds that we can best understand reality by breaking it up into its various parts. More broadly we search for the elements whose removal from a causal chain would alter the outcome. It is critical to reductionism that causes be ranked hierarchically. While the ecological approach also values the specification of simple components, it does not stop with that: it considers how components interact to become systems whose nature can’t be defined merely by calculating the sum of their parts (Gaddis, 2002). The reductionists in L2 writing believe that if we can establish the writing
construct, we can predict and control the outcomes of L2 writing performance whether it takes place in the United States, India, China, or Japan. My question is, does the reductionist epistemology do justice to EFL writing from a socio-historical perspective?

Let me show you a few examples of English writing produced by Chinese students in different historical periods.

My father’s letter came to me at breakfast time. My tears fell in my bowl when I read it. I went upstairs to read it over and over. He said that it was very difficult to jump the stairs of study. He always knew I would have a very hard time in Ginling. He did not agree with me when I came to Ginling for this sake. He did not forbid me for he wanted me to get the experience of [being] a poor student. He hoped that I would change my pride which I possessed a long time during the first year in Ginling. He promised me to [let me] stay at Ginling [for] five or six years and hoped my success some day. […] I put down the letter and sat as a statue [for] about one hour. (Tsai, 1923)

This essay was written by a female student in 1923 at Ginling College, which was the first woman’s college in China. Before 1905, women were denied school education in China. At Ginling College, English composition opened an outlet for the students to reflect upon their dreams and realistic challenges for pursuing education. This passage is the voice of a liberated woman, who struggled to reconcile these challenges in her life. She needed to fulfill her traditional role in the family, secure financial support for her education, and meet stringent [very demanding] academic requirements.

Next, let’s look at a Chinese-to-English translation exercise that freshmen students did at Shanghai Foreign Language Institute in 1972 when the cultural revolution was still going on in China.

A: After liberation, my mom continued to work in the same plant, but her life completely changed. She learned to read and write. She began studying Chairman Mao’s works and understood that we must do revolution. Our family is living a very happy life.
B: We should not forget our miserable lives in the past. We should always listen to Chairman Mao and follow the Party. (Shanghai Foreign Language Institute, 1972, p. 233-234)
During the cultural revolution, to “serve the people” and to “follow the Chinese communist party’s principles”, students had to sacrifice their individual voice and style. Students participated in political study sessions, public rallies, writing wall posters, and reciting Chairman Mao’s works. On a daily basis, they were besieged by obscure, simple, and agitating slogans invented by the Party’s propaganda machines. Therefore a slogan-ridden, formalized language seeped into pedagogical discourse, manifested in the students’ reading and writing, as the above translation work shows.

Finally, let’s take a look at a picture, which I believe makes up the big picture of EFL writing in China now. On February 28 this year, a senior student of Chengdu University of Electronic Science and Technology jumped off a five-floor building and landed on the ground DEAD. Why did he want to kill himself several months before his graduation? Because he failed the College English Test Band 4, which includes an English writing task. Without passing the test, he would not be able to get his diploma. He would have a lot of difficulty to find a job, and he would disgrace himself and his family.

In what ways is a model, a writing construct, like that suggested by William Grabe, able to predict the outcomes of these three student writings. Can his model predict the way female students voiced their struggle for education in 1923? Can his model predict that students were indoctrinated into Communist ideology through the translation exercises in China? Can his model predict that this senior student composed his last piece of English writing right before he jumped off a five-floor building? I know it is unfair to pick Grabe’s model for critique here. My point is that ultimately a reductionist model should not be the general model of L2 writing that we are looking for.

I want to argue here that L2 writing is a human activity, therefore it should be studied primarily as a humanistic enterprise. We should not only study how students write as a cognitive process, but more importantly how students write in a particular socio-cultural context with certain material condition. Students write not only for writing’s sake; they express their thoughts, their feelings, their connection with their home community and new communities through writing. Bernard Spolsky’s (1989) categories of conditions for language learning, including individual abilities and preferences, social context, attitudes and motivation, opportunities for learning and practices, and formal instructional contexts, are all important elements for L2 writing when it takes place in a particular socio-historical context. I suggest, an ethic, humanistic understanding of written performance should be emphasized in L2 writing research, and an ecological approach should be used to develop a more ethic theory about L2 writing. EFL writing research draws our attention to how English writing is taught similarly or differently in non-English dominant contexts.
in the world. Only through more EFL writing research, can we come to a more accurate understanding of L2 writing. This ecological theory does not intend to be predictive, but rather it enlightens us and provides us guidance on what we are doing.

Finally, let me end my talk with a quote from Malinda Reichelt’s (2005) recent study on English writing instruction in Poland. She says,

EFL writing pedagogy in Poland, as well as in other non-English-dominant contexts, is shaped by the role English plays, local attitudes toward English, the history of English-language teaching, and other context-specific educational factors. These important components deserve further attention and investigation in contexts throughout the world. The results of such inquiries provide an important source of information in the development of an accurate and inclusive theory of L2 writing. (p. 226)

Thank you.
References


