



ELSEVIER

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

SCIENCE @ DIRECT®

Journal of Second Language Writing 13 (2004) 253–256

**JOURNAL OF
SECOND
LANGUAGE
WRITING**

Report

New directions in EFL writing: A Report from China

Xiaoye You*

*Department of English, Purdue University, 500 Oval Drive,
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2038, USA*

From May 21 to 24, 2004, I attended the [4th International Conference on ELT in China](#), held in Beijing. Held concurrently with this conference was the Basic English Education Symposium. Of the nearly 500 presentations and workshops at the conference, 49 were focused on English writing instruction and assessment at the college level, involving both English and non-English majors. Considering the fact that the field of L2 writing is gradually branching into the EFL context, I thought a brief report of these writing-related presentations might inform the *JSLW* readership of recent developments in the teaching of and research on English writing in China, the country with the largest population of EFL student writers in the world.

The conference was organized by the China English Language Education Association, Beijing Foreign Studies University, and the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. The first conference was held in Guanzhou in 1985, and since then has become a major event in the Chinese ELT circle. Over 1000 English teachers and researchers participated in this year's conference, the majority of whom were from China. More than 20 countries and regions were represented in this conference, including Australia, Britain, Canada, Iran, Jamaica, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, and the United States.

New Directions in EFL Writing

Under the conference theme “New Directions in ELT in China,” writing-related presentations did reflect some new directions in EFL writing instruction and research in

* Tel.: +1 765 494 3740; fax: +1 765 494 3780.
E-mail address: youx@purdue.edu (X. You).

China. In what follows, I would like to introduce these directions and consider how they have defined writing instruction and research in this particular EFL context.

New requirements for ELT

At the beginning of the conference, Professor Hu Zhuanglin of Peking University delivered a plenary address, defending a new wave of college ELT reform underway in China. This reform was initiated by an educational decree, “Teaching Requirements for College English Curriculum,”¹ published by the Chinese [Ministry of Education in January 2004](#). This document lays out new goals and requirements for college English teaching and its pedagogical modes, assessment, and management. English education at the college level is conceptualized as not only the teaching of language knowledge and skills, but also of language learning strategies and cross-cultural communication skills. Requirements for writing ability, as well as reading, speaking, listening, and translation abilities, are articulated at three different language proficiency levels. Professor Hu emphasized the importance of encouraging individualized learning, collaborative learning, and hyper-textual learning in this ELT reform. Several conference participants reported on experiments in teaching writing conducted in the spirit of the new educational decree. For example, Niu Ruiying and Gao Lanying explored the extent to which students are competent to correct their own compositions. Wu Ligao and Feng Lei looked at computer-supported interactive writing, and An Xuan and Frank Borchardt reported on how Web-based writing instruction could provide opportunities for individualized, collaborative, and hyper-textual learning in teaching English writing.

Characteristics of Chinese students’ writing

Efforts were also made to identify the characteristics of Chinese students’ writing products and processes. Regarding written products, several papers examined students’ uses of cohesive devices in English writing. Two papers compared email writing as well as uses of scientific hedging in the academic writing of Chinese and American students.

With regard to writing processes, some attention was devoted to identifying writing strategies employed by Chinese students, including those used by good English learners. For example, Wang Junju reported on the discovery of 34 kinds of strategies employed by college students, which fall into five categories—*affective, cognitive, meta-cognitive, avoidance, and compensatory strategies*. Sun Wenkang talked about how English majors write their BA theses. Sun found that of the 52 colleges and universities he surveyed, only a small number offer academic writing courses, and that of the 147 English-major MA students surveyed, half were unable to write their BA theses in proper academic writing styles.

¹ College English refers specifically to English taught to non-English-major students in China, who constitute the majority of English learners in the university.

Classroom instruction and assessment

Nearly half of the 49 papers reported on various experiments conducted in the classroom to improve students' English writing. Most English teachers have to confront several obstacles when teaching writing in Chinese colleges, such as large class size, disjunction between classroom instruction and the College English Test (CET), students' test-driven learning styles, their relatively low English proficiency, and the teacher's limited training in teaching writing (You, 2004). A few papers reported on quite encouraging attempts amidst these obstacles. Lin Lihua reported on the use of creative writing tasks as warm-up exercises; Fu Dongqi, on portfolio assessment; Ouyang Huhua, on learner/learning-centered marking; and Wang Duqin, on the adoption of a task-based approach. As a wakeup call to all English teachers who are interested in trying out imported writing pedagogies, Zhan Ju investigated both students' and teachers' attitudes toward process pedagogy and argued that the difficulties in implementing this pedagogy are derived from differences between Chinese and Western cultures, conflicts between linear thinking and multidimensional and critical thinking, conflicts caused by the "paradigm shift," and the gap between theory and practice.

Closely related to classroom instruction is writing assessment, which was another focus among the papers. A few of them deal with the National Matriculation English Test (NMET), the Test for English Majors (TEM), designing writing tasks for essay exams, and portfolio assessment. A study on NMET by Qi Luxia was quite revealing. She observed that although the writing task for the NMET is considered the most communicative element in the test by the test writers, high school teachers and students tend to neglect the communicative elements of writing in real-life situations and devote excessive attention to the testing situation and the assumed preferences of the test-paper raters.

Chinese literacy and English writing

The relationship between Chinese literacy and English writing instruction was another interesting topic among writing teachers and researchers. A few presenters considered Chinese writing in English from the perspective of World Englishes. Andy Kirkpatrick introduced several rhetorical principles found in a classical Chinese rhetorical treatise, *Wen Ze* (or *Rules of Writing*), and argued that the English writing of a Chinese person should be allowed to reflect aspects of the rich and varied Chinese rhetorical tradition. In a similar vein, Shane Xuexin Cao suggested that the typical Chinese way of English writing, involving, for example, the use of "we" instead of "I" and of inductive reasoning patterns, should be appreciated as a positive voice of the Chinese cultural identity. Chinese literacy experiences in relation to learning English writing were examined in several other papers. Wang Lifei addressed the influence of L1 literacy on L2 writing, and Wang Zhaohui reported on a study of high school students' L1 writing instruction.

EFL writing and ESL writing

From this brief report, it is quite apparent that English writing instruction and research in China are heavily influenced by ESL writing research in North America. Anglo-

American approaches to writing instruction, such as process, task-based, and portfolio approaches, are being tested in English classrooms. Concepts in ESL writing, such as peer review, portfolio assessment, paradigm shift, and post-process, are also widely used in EFL writing research in China.

Despite these commonalities, striking differences can be identified between EFL writing in China and ESL writing in North America. First, the teaching of EFL writing at the college level in China is conceptualized as part of the holistic development of the students' English ability rather than as an independent course, as in the United States, which thus entails searching for writing pedagogies, learning strategies, and assessment tools suitable to the Chinese context. Second, students' written products and writing processes are examined by researchers in the EFL context instead of the ESL context. Third, the Chinese style of English writing, which can embody Chinese linguistic and rhetorical preferences, has begun to be conceptually appreciated by some EFL professionals. In light of these characteristics, I hope this short report will heighten consciousness of the distinct nature of EFL writing.

References

- The 4th International Conference on ELT in China. (2004). *Program and abstracts*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- The Ministry of Education. (2004). *Daxue yingyu kecheng jiaoxue yaoqiu* [Teaching requirements for college English curriculum]. Retrieved June 17, 2004, from: <http://www.edu.cn/20040120/3097997.shtml>.
- You, X. (2004). The choice made from no choice: English writing instruction in a Chinese university. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13(2), 97–110.