A Case Study into the Writing of Chinese Postgraduate Students in a UK Academic Environment

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Abstract

This case study explores the problematic issues in academic writing of three Chinese postgraduate students studying in UK academic environment. It aims to attempt to identify mismatches in lecturer and postgraduate student expectations and to understand the reasoning behind these mismatches from the students' perspective. This study was carried out based on the extended academic essay assignment feedback of three British lecturers on a Postgraduate Masters course in Human Resource Management. By using research method of qualitative analysis, this present study found that eight categories of negative comments. It contains lack of criticality; lack of voice; unreferenced sources, unsubstantiated statements, plagiarism; inappropriate referencing conventions; lack of clear relevance and focus; inappropriate academic style; unclear expression (language concerns) and cohesive and structural weaknesses. And then, it has been concluded that the pedagogical implications of such research are far-reaching. The students themselves require a far greater understanding not only of what is expected of them, but also of how to meet these expectations in practice and trainers need to focus on the development of the schemata.

Keywords: case study, writing, Chinese postgraduate students, UK academic environment

1. Introduction

The increasingly popular domain of contrastive rhetoric was introduced in cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education that proposed the notion that first language cultural conventions were often transferred into second language writing performance. Since then, research into cross-cultural writing styles and rhetorical organisation had become widespread. One cultural group that seems to have become of particular interest to researchers was the Chinese. This interest will presumably increase with the dramatically increasing influx of Chinese students into Western educational institutions as a result of improved economic conditions and increased freedom of movement in China.

This study will demonstrate the evaluation and contextualisation of a paper by Kirkpatrick (1997) on the influence of traditional Chinese essay forms on Chinese students' English writing and design a case study, it will be carried out in order to investigate mismatches in anglophone lecturers' and sinophone students' expectations regarding academic writing in a British Academic Institution.

2. Literature Review

Kirkpatrick (1997) was a well-published scholar in the field of Chinese-English contrastive rhetoric and contrastive academic cultures, He traced the origins and discussed the influence of two commonly cited Chinese writing structures, the four part qi-cheng-zhuan-he (beginning-continuation-transition-summary) and the ba gu wen (eight-legged essay). Written in response to contrastive rhetoric theorists and researchers alike who had contended that the two Chinese structures had a strong influence on the written English of contemporary Chinese students, Kirkpatrick argued in his paper that their influence was in fact considerably less than had been claimed. The indirectness of Chinese writing was well-documented and led to argument that this could be explained by the influence of the ba gu wen (eight-legged essay) (Connor, 1996). The Ba gu wen had been described as an essay form made up of eight parts which incorporated "elaborate parallelism and harmonious contrast" (Wu and

Rubin, 2014, p. 153) leading to indirectness in discussing themes and answering questions. It was widely agreed that the ba gu wen became a regulated exam style of the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties (Kirkpatrick, 1997; Connor, 1996). Chronologically speaking, Kirkpartick asserted that the qi-cheng-zhuan-he predates the ba gu wen by several centuries, tracing it back to the Tang dynasty (618-907). For this reason his paper focused primarily on the influence on Chinese students' English writing of the latter form to the relative exclusion of the former. He did not however acknowledge that the origins of the qi-cheng-zhuan-he were "difficult to unravel" and that Chinese scholars were not unanimous on this issue, they considered the ba gu wen to predate the qi-cheng-zhuan-he (Connor, 1996).

Supporters of Kaplan's theory (1966) that the indirectness of Chinese students' English writing was due to the influence of the ba gu wen (Wu & Rubin, 2014; Young, 1994). Although their opinions did not appear to be based on substantially valid and reliable empirical research, the ba gu wen did feature heavily in the contrastive rhetoric literature when researching Chinese students, however it seems that more and more scholars either considered Kaplan's original proposition as an oversimplification of reality, or dismissed it completely. Interestingly, it was argued that Kaplan himself recognised that his original theory was an oversimplification although he was not prepared to dismiss it entirely. Kirkpatrick, by contrast, identified three principal arguments against Kaplan and his supporters: the difficulty of the ba gu wen for the average writer; its lack of acceptance by Chinese scholars who considered it to hold no place whatsoever in China's intellectual history except as a glaring example of demerit, and the strong post-ba gu wen influence of Western ideas and Western rhetorical models on the mainland Chinese. This argument was echoed in a study by Mohan and Lo (1985) who argued strongly, based on research with Chinese students in Hong Kong that the organisational pattern of Chinese writing did not differ markedly from that of English. Although Kirkpatrick's paper introduced some very interesting observations relating to the global rhetorical structure of text, its main purpose was to dismiss the proposition that traditional Chinese writing styles have a significant effect on Chinese students' English writing. Therefore, it did not attempt to explain the causes of other commonly recognised tendencies in Chinese writers' English redaction. It is important to look to the wider literature for research into these issues.

A number of studies had been carried out attempting to determine common characteristics in Chinese students' extended English writing, often based on Sinophone students studying in an Anglophone academic context. It had been recognised that the difficulties faced by such students go far beyond the purely linguistic (Smith & Smith, 1999) into, among others, such issues as indirectness, lack of personal disclosure and voice, lack of criticality and over reliance on sources often leading to plagiarism (O'Connell & Jin, 2001).

3. Method

3.1 Research Questions

Ferris et al. (1997) acknowledged that teacher response to student writing was a vital but neglected aspect of second language compositional research. Therefore the purpose of this research study was to carry out an investigation into mismatches between UK lecturers' and Chinese students' expectations concerning the requirements of extended academic essay writing in practice. The following research questions were therefore identified:

a) Based on lecturer feedback and commentary, which features of Chinese students' English essays are identifiable as weaknesses from a Western academic perspective?

b) Using group interview method with the students, how do they perceive these 'weaknesses'?

c) Through the understanding of the origins of these 'mismatches' in expectations, what are the pedagogical implications?

3.2 Research Philosophy and Approach

Prior to carrying out research, certain ontological and epistemological decisions have to be made (Collis & Hussey, 2013: 49). Since the aim of this action research study was to attempt to identify mismatches in lecturer and postgraduate student expectations and to understand the reasoning behind these mismatches from the students' perspective, it was felt appropriate to tend towards an interpretivist philosophy (Cohen et al., 2003), taking an inductive approach and gathering qualitative data. The strength of this approach it has been argued is that it allows a richer, more in-depth understanding of the complexities of phenomena. However critics of the interpretivist paradigm identify a major weakness in that the data collected is specific to the particular case studied therefore caution should be taken when generalising it to a population, and hence reliability can be low

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

3.3 Sample and Research Strategy

This study was carried out based on the extended academic essay assignment feedback of three British lecturers on a Postgraduate Masters course in Human Resource Management. The course began in October 2014 with a culturally and linguistically mixed cohort of twenty-six students of which five are of Chinese nationality. It was noticed that three of the five Chinese students were finding the assignment tasks problematic and the work they were submitting was not meeting the academic standards required by the lecturers. They were therefore selected as the sample for this study. This method of sampling was known as purposive sampling as the cases included have been handpicked because they satisfy the researcher's needs (Cohen et al., 2003). It should be noted that this method of sampling did not pretend to represent the wider population since it is deliberately selective.

The research was carried out in two stages. The first stage involved the analysis of lecturer feedback on nine assignments (three students x three lecturers) in order to identify features of the students' essays that the lecturers judged to be in conflict with the assessment requirements of the course, and thus their own academic expectations. The results of this analysis allowed the researcher to further develop the research questions that were used in the second stage. The second stage of the research involved a recorded group interview with the three Chinese students aimed at gaining an insight into their perspectives on the issues identified in the analysis of the lecturers' feedback. Since the author had noticed that the three Chinese students were having difficulties meeting the requirements of the course, requested that a four-hour academic writing workshop take place. The entire workshop was recorded with a digital voice recorder, the students' permission had been previously granted for ethical reasons. The first hour of the workshop was set aside for directly addressing the research questions in a formalised focus group format. A focus group was a form of group interview in which the participants discussed together topics supplied by the interviewer, in contrast to a conventional group interview which tended to be more backwards and forwards between the interviewer and the group. Through this interaction relevant data emerges and is useful for exploratory research of this nature (Cohen et al., 2003).

The subsequent three hours of the workshop were devoted to developing the students' understanding of essay writing in a UK academic context and to introduce strategies for successful study. It should be noted that a number of interesting insights were revealed in the second part of the workshop which have also been included in the findings and analysis section below.

3.4 Data Quality Issues

When designing a case study, consideration needs to be given to issues of data quality (Saunders et al., 2003). Reliability and generalisability of qualitative data have been addressed earlier however it is important in interpretivist studies to give thought to the issue of validity. Studies have shown that one of the principal threats to validity is interviewer bias (Cohen et al., 2003) in which the interviewer tends to seek answers to support preconceived notions. Being aware of this issue, this present study attempted to avoid leading and potentially confusing questions and allowed the students to interact with minimal interruption.

Validity can also suffer as a result of the perceived relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, particularly relevant for high power-distance cultures such as China (Hofstede, 1986). Since there was a risk that the teacher-student workshop context may have discouraged students from expressing their true feelings, an attempt was made to reduce this threat to validity through an initial 'ice-breaking' session with unthreatening general conversation, the development of an informal, relaxed atmosphere and an assertion that the information given in the session would remain confidential.

3.5 Data Collection

The first stage was the feedback on the assignments given from lecturers which was both as an overall commentary on formal assignment report sheets and as comments written on the scripts themselves (available upon request). Given the word limitations of this assignment, Appendix contains a detailed analysis of the lecturer feedback which identified eight categories of negative comment: lack of criticality; lack of voice; unreferenced sources, unsubstantiated statements, plagiarism; inappropriate referencing conventions; lack of clear relevance and focus; inappropriate academic style; unclear expression (language concerns); cohesive and structural weaknesses.

Having analysed and identified the lecturer feedback, the students were subsequently invited to discuss the eight categories of criticism from their perspective.

The second stage was analysis of students' perceptions. The initial questions posed by the researcher aimed at establishing the students' previous writing experience. The students were asked the questions:

"Have you written essays in English or Chinese before?"

All three students responded that they had had very limited experience of essay writing in China. They had all previously been economics majors in which the majority of assessment was carried out through written tests designed to assess their memorisation of facts and ratios. On the rare occasions that they were asked to produce an extended piece of written work, the sources were provided for them and they were not required to look any further into the academic literature. Student B noted that there were very limited sources available to students at her Chinese university, a sentiment shared by the other two students.

Since English has become a compulsory discipline in China, they were all required to write one final English essay to graduate from university. However this was not based on academic sources and Students A and C admitted to having memorised a model essay prior to the exam and attempted to replicate it word for word in the exam.

"Did you do practice essays before the exam?"

The answer to this question was a resounding 'no'. The students presumed that the reason was because their English classes were very large (from 50-150) and therefore the time investment for marking by the teachers would have been too great. It had been confirmed by most English teachers in Chinese College that insufficient time was granted for marking and commenting on individual students' written work. Rather the teacher would set a written task for the students and then provide a model answer on the board. According to the study the teacher in question had the 'correct' model in her mind before she even set the written task and went so far as to recommend "students with low proficiency should try to memorise some model writings, so you can write with more ease".

"Have you heard of the ba gu wen? How does it influence your writing?"

The students' opinion was that the ba gu wen was an old fashioned writing structure that has absolutely no influence on their own writing. Student A pointed out that only Chinese literature majors have any contact with this kind of writing structure. Interestingly, Student C likened the ba gu wen to the Western system of report writing which also has a fixed structure.

4. Results

Having discussed more general issues of writing with the students, attention turned to the eight categories of weakness identified in the lecturer feedback.

4.1 Criticality

"Have you heard of the term criticality? If so what do you understand by this?"

All three students admitted that they had been introduced to the term 'criticality' as it had featured heavily in their assignment briefs and in the assignment seminars run by the lecturers. Student B however expressed that it was still a very abstract concept, she understood that in this new academic environment she would have to be critical but had not been shown how. Students A and C agreed strongly with this observation.

In the workshop session following the interview, the researcher asked the students to look at a theoretical framework, in this case Tuckman's theory of group development, and consider any weaknesses or criticisms of the theory from their own experience. The students clearly had considerable difficulty with this task and were unable to contribute any ideas at all, leading to the question:

"Have you ever been required to criticise academic theories or your lecturers before?"

Student B replied that it is not necessary to criticise theory and that a good student sometimes must forget their own opinions and not question their teacher or the teaching methods. Student C pointed out that one of the most important features of a good student in China is the ability to build strong social networks and live in harmony with others. Therefore she considered criticality not to be conducive to this aim. Further discussion revealed that all academic instruction the students had been exposed to was completely teacher centred and all assessment involved memorisation and rote learning of facts. When asked if this is typical of Chinese universities they were unsure although it certainly was true for their particular cases. Again the issue of class size was brought up which according to the students may dictate the teaching and assessment methods.

The frequent lack of criticality among Chinese students is an issue that was very widely discussed in the literature, the data gathered in this study affirming results of previous research. Cortazzi and Jin (2014) argued that lack of criticality was intrinsically linked to the collectivist principles of the culture. Furthermore, the Chinese educational system was based on learning being seen as 'receiving' for one can only create on the basis of mastery rather than discovery. As a result, Chinese students were seldom actively encouraged to reflect critically on the work of academic superiors. Furthermore assessment in Chinese academic culture focused predominantly on rote-learning and memorisation rather than the highly valued skill in Western academia of critical thinking.

4.2 Lack of Voice

"What do you understand by voice in academic writing?"

All three students were very perplexed by the concept of voice. When the researcher expanded on the question with a brief definition of voice Student B became visibly agitated asserting that she had been explicitly instructed that English academic writing should be impersonal. Student A claimed to have used examples from her own experience in her writing but these had been dismissed by the lecturers as irrelevant anecdotes. Clearly the concept of voice caused considerable confusion to the students.

Literature pertaining to voice in Chinese writing again alludes heavily to the cultural emphasis on the collective value, in which it is regarded as "selfish" if a student overtly expresses a personal opinion or writes from a personal perspective. This often leads to the construction of a jigsaw of points with no individual voice, reminiscent of the lecturer's jumble of slogans patched together analogy that can be seen in Appendix. Results from this study also reveal that Chinese postgraduate students who did not even have the concept of voice, much less the skill to engineer it into their writing.

4.3 Unreferenced Sources, Unsubstantiated Statements, Plagiarism

"Some of the lecturers' comments indicate that they suspect plagiarism in your work. What do you understand by plagiarism?"

Student C admitted instantly that she had directly copied passages of her assignment although she considered this not to be plagiarism because she had cited the source in the bibliography. Her genuine surprise was evident when told that copying in such a way is considered plagiarism in the UK. It also became apparent on further discussion that all three students were experiencing difficulties coping with the level of academic language encountered and were therefore having to resort to verbatim copying of large sections of sources seemingly with limited comprehension of their semantic content.

"Why do you think the lecturers have often written 'source?' in the margin of your essays?"

The subsequent discussion about this topic revealed a significant misunderstanding of the nature of English academic writing. It was clear that the students had misunderstood the importance of substantiating their claims and grounding their arguments in theory. By contrast they assumed that it was more important to demonstrate the maturity of their own thinking and opinions. In the subsequent workshop session considerable surprise was obvious when the students were shown a sample English academic essay in which all material from sources was highlighted (representing about 85%).

Again much has been written about the frequently witnessed over-reliance on sources and plagiarism in Chinese students' English writing. While the students demonstrated little understanding that they were committing an academic offence. There is much speculation as to the reasoning behind this phenomenon, however three salient points seems to emerge. Firstly, in the Chinese education system it is not wrong to incorporate other's ideas into one's own work because collective achievement is valued and intellectual property is regarded as public property. Secondly, it is proposed that Chinese students have been educated in a tradition where there is great respect for sources and authorities, and also a high degree of shared knowledge, among educated people, of what the sources are and what they say. When writers draw on sources like these without explicit attribution, they are not claiming that the ideas originated with them, for their readers are expected to share this knowledge, and it would therefore be patronising to remind them where it came from. Therefore by not citing sources, the student is showing respect to both the source and the reader. The third suggestion is closely related to the issues of criticality and voice. Since Chinese students are reluctant to freely express personal views and criticism, they tend to prefer quotation and paraphrase of other's words or the use of set phrases.

4.4 Inappropriate Referencing Conventions

"Are you aware of the Harvard referencing system used at this university?"

The subsequent discussion showed that students were aware of the Harvard referencing system but were clearly unaware of its importance in the UK academic environment. Student B voiced the issue that despite having had a formal workshop about referencing, this occurred during their induction week when their attention was on other, more pressing issues, of cultural and geographical adjustment and orientation.

4.5 Lack of Clear Relevance and Focus

"Why do you think the lecturers have written 'relevance' in the margins of your work?"

While Student A freely admitted to not having properly read or understood the assignment briefs, Students B and C were at first adamant that the relevance of their content was clear to them, leading to the question:

"Do you think you addressed the question directly?"

The answer to this question by Student B was very interesting. She suggested that it was important to discuss related issues first before looking at the question itself. This was met with nods of agreement by the other two students. Wu and Rubin (2014, p153) considered this tendency in Chinese writing to originate from the Confucian principle of Zheng Min meaning "one first needs to call things by their proper name". In other words, Chinese students must first state the condition of composition (the what, when, how, and why) before approaching a theme. It is apparent that the lecturers had expected a more direct addressing of the set question.

As seen earlier, indirectness has been attributed to the influence of the ba gu wen although this has largely been discredited, some replacing it with the notion of differences in Chinese and Western views of self. It is argued that the fact that the Chinese concept of self is based on Confucian principles of collectivism makes directness in writing difficult. Others considered the issue from a less psychological but more, albeit related, rhetorical perspective and attribute indirectness to the conflict between English writing's use of topic sentence and the Chinese structural rule of "from surface to core" (Wu and Rubin, 2014, p154). Basing part of their research on the latter perspective, Wu and Rubin (2014) found a statistically significant difference in the placement of thesis statements between American and Taiwanese Higher Education students, Taiwanese tending to place thesis statements later in the text than American writers, which they assumed to be indicative of the perceived indirectness of sinophone writers.

4.6 Inappropriate Academic Style

"Why do you think you have been criticised for inappropriate style?"

The answer to this question was simply that despite obtaining IELTS 6.5, due to a lack of contact with English academic sources, the student did not have a sufficiently developed linguistic sensitivity to style and register. Whilst she was aware that different English writing styles do exist, she was attempting to write fluently with her existing lexical and syntactic English knowledge.

4.7 Unclear Expression

"How do you feel about studying in English?"

All three students agreed that they had not anticipated the difficulties that they would face from linguistic difficulties. They found it difficult to follow lectures, extremely difficult to cope with the amount and level of academic reading that were required and concerned about the time took them to write academic essays.

"How do you cope with these difficulties?"

Student B replied that she stayed awake most of the night to read and do assignments although she realised that she was becoming exhausted. On further discussion the students seemed to be under the misconception that she was required to read and memorise all the books on their reading lists from cover to cover. Clearly from the interview, all three felt that their study skills were substantially underdeveloped. Arguably linked to linguistic difficulties are the issues of over reliance on sources and plagiarism.

4.8 Cohesive and Structural Weaknesses

"How do you link paragraphs and sections when you are writing?"

This question again caused confusion among the students. Discussion followed which revealed that they had little understanding that they were required to link sections and paragraphs together explicitly. According to

Student B, Chinese lecturers should be able to follow the ideas without being directed as is common in English academic prose. Again this was considered to be unnecessary and even insulting for the reader. This raises the question of reader-writer responsibility. However Classical Chinese was a reader-responsible language (possibly from the influence of the ba gu wen), "Modern Chinese is more like English in that it is a writer-responsible language". This was echoed by Ramsay (2013) who stated that "modern Chinese composition textbooks in fact explicitly condemn indirection, digression, lack of paragraph unity, incoherence in thought". The student response in this study would indicate that how the Chinese and English concepts of writer responsibility and cohesion coincide is another problematic area.

5. Conclusion

This research study has demonstrated that significant mismatches do indeed exist between the academic essay writing expectations of the three Chinese postgraduate students and the three UK lecturers. As the influx of Chinese students into Anglophone educational institutions continues to grow, it is clear that researchers, particularly in UK, are recognising the increasing importance of addressing this issue. However, despite researchers' enthusiasm to apply cross-linguistic, cross-culture and contrastive rhetoric theory to difficulties faced by Chinese students, from the present research study it is apparent that the three students in question have very limited experience of extended writing both in Chinese and in English. Researchers in this field should not overlook Chinese students' possible naivety as writers in their search for a more glamorous explanation.

That being said however, the pedagogical implications of such research are far-reaching. The students themselves require a far greater understanding not only of what is expected of them, but also of how to meet these expectations in practice. Introducing them to criticality and plagiarism when they lack the schemata in which to contextualise such abstract concepts appears to lead to greater confusion and apprehension. It could be argued that trainers need to focus on the development of the schemata, of a Western self through practical exercises and clear examples. It seems equally important, although financially and logistically impractical, that international students are given the opportunity to acclimatise to the academic environment before commencing their chosen course. Interestingly the other two Chinese students in the cohort had participated on a pre-sessional course prior to their Masters course and, while their results were only marginal passes, had developed a far greater understanding of lecturer expectations as a result. Given the intensity and short-duration of UK Masters courses, it can be argued that an introductory pre-sessional course should be insisted upon by institutions for students with significantly contrastive educational backgrounds.

Training should however not be limited to the students. The frustration evident in the lecturer feedback in this study seems to come from a lack of understanding of the nature of the Chinese students' academic and cultural backgrounds. It is not uncommon to hear dismissive remarks from UK lecturers about Asian students' lack of class participation and reluctance to engage with the material that is presented to them. Perhaps with a greater understanding of the difficulties faced by such students, both parties would achieve far greater levels of satisfaction from the learning and teaching experience.

With regard to further research emerging as a result of the present study, it would be very interesting to carry out similar interviews with the same sample of students and to analyse lecturer feedback at various stages over the academic year. By carrying out such a longitudinal study, students' development and adjustment to the UK academic system could be measured yielding, potentially interesting results as to the individual or group internal strategies and external factors contributing to their success or failure.

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Appendix

Analysis of lecturer feedback

The following table consists of a breakdown of the comments by each lecturer on each student's written work. Based on this summary, eight categories of negative comment were identified and are discussed below.

Comment	Category
Student A - Lecturer 1	
descriptive	1
no critical discussion	1
little academic support or critique/ under referenced	3
use of unsubstantiated sweeping statements	3
lack of theoretical framework	3
relevance of essay to set question unclear	5
lack of links to previous points	8
difficult to follow ideas	7/8
problems with referencing conventions	4
Student A - Lecturer 2	
does not identify sources	3
descriptive	1

lack of depth	1
poor referencing	4
relevance to set question unclear	5
must identify alternative perspectives in order to develop an argument	1
shows little understanding of the issues	1/5
Student A - Lecturer 3	
not the paper that was asked for	5
unfocused	5
use of lists and bullet points – descriptive	1/6
poor understanding of referencing conventions	4
Student B - Lecturer 1	
lack of relevance	5
missed the point as to what was expected	5
not addressing the question	5
poor referencing	4
Student B - Lecturer 2	
style changes, not sure which words are your own	3
references not given	3
lack of focus	5
little sense of your own voice	2
poor referencing	4
Student B - Lecturer 3	
failed to engage with the ideas of the unit	1/5
superficial	1
poor structure	8
unreferenced material	3
unfocused and relevance to question unclear	5
inadequate sources cited	3
failure to ground in theory	3
examples used but unclear how they support the argument	5
inappropriate use of bullet points	1/6
Student C – Lecturer 1	
materials underused	3
need sources to support comments	3
unclear wording	7
not focusing on set question	5
inappropriate citation conventions	4
not using own words	3
relevance of material unclear	5
inappropriate style	6

Student C – Lecturer 2	
lack of internal cohesion and linking	8
style changes indicating plagiarism	3
inappropriate use of colloquial language	6
not relating material explicitly to the question	5
Student C – Lecturer 3	
repeating textbook discussions	1
implicit links that should be explicit	5
irrelevant material	5
unclear structure	8
not answering the question	5
unclear expression of ideas	7/8
poor referencing	4
lack of voice and personal comment	2

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