

A Case Study on Writing Difficulties of Five Chinese English Majors

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Abstract

Writing ability is an essential skill for college students to improve their school performance and complete their academic writing tasks. Proficient English writing skills are also highly advantageous for their future career prospects and personal growth. However, many English learners face difficulties in various aspects of English writing. The study investigated the writing difficulties encountered by five Chinese undergraduates majoring in English; and discussed the primary causes of these writing difficulties. The research instruments included two writing tasks and the retrospective interviews. Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. The findings showed that their writing difficulties are mainly manifested in constructing writing content, coherence and cohesion, insufficient linguistic knowledge, difficulties in applying writing theories to writing practices, and difficulties caused by time constraints. The participants also shared their perspectives about the English writing courses, emphasizing the addition of more genres other than argumentative writing, actual writing practice over objective examinations, and the need for improvement of the textbooks.

Keywords: Chinese student-writers, English writing, writing difficulties, writing performance

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of economic globalization, the role of English as an international communication tool has become increasingly important. Writing in English has become more frequent than before for study and work. People now have more opportunities to engage in international operations, increasing the need to write English materials, such as producing reports, drafting contracts and specifications, and preparing financial documents. Rowh (2006) mentioned that good writing abilities are helpful for career success. She claimed that writing well is crucial in professions, including journalism, advertising, and education. Writing is an important language output skill, and it can reflect students' comprehensive language ability, so many formal English language tests have writing parts. Writing helps students learn the target language, practice their ability of wording and phrasing, and it also could help students develop other various abilities, such as critical thinking ability.

In China, the importance of English writing can also be seen from its proportion in English examinations. For example, English writing accounts for almost 23.33% (35 points) of English tests (total score is 150 points) in the College Entrance Examination at present. After students enter college, they still need to learn English and take the College English Test (CET) or the Test for English Majors (TEM). All these tests include writing parts. Therefore, strengthening writing ability is quite important for college students to improve their school performance and complete their academic writing tasks. Similarly, many job positions require employees to possess good writing skills. Skilled writers are more likely to get good jobs or grab better promotion opportunities in the future after they graduate from university.

Almost all Chinese schools offer English courses from primary school to university, but English writing courses are not widely offered. English majors are offered specialized English writing courses at college. The national syllabus for college-level English Majors by National Advisory Committee for Foreign Language Teaching (NACFLT, 2000) requires that at least three semesters of the sophomore and junior years must include writing courses; and an academic English writing course should be arranged at the beginning of the fourth year. In addition, colleges may offer other writing-related elective courses based on their own situation, such as English Practical Writing, English News Writing, English Stylistics. Different colleges offer different elective courses. However, for non-English major students, specific English writing courses are not mandatory. As a result, some schools do not provide separate English writing courses for them. This leads to the integration of writing instruction into a

general comprehensive English course, and these students may not obtain adequate writing guidance and training to develop their writing skills. For many students, mastering English writing remains a significant challenge. Investigating students' writing difficulties could aid them in understanding their writing process; assist teachers in finding more effective ways to address students' writing difficulties and improve their teaching; help administrators improve the curriculum related to writing. The study aims to investigate the difficulties of Chinese undergraduate English majors, then to discuss, from their perspective, the kind of writing course helpful to them.

2. Literature Review

In China, students' writing skills are systematically taught and assessed, especially for English majors. The National College English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors (NACFLT, 2000) stipulates that before graduation, English majors should: "write articles of various genres with sufficient content, appropriate vocabulary, and clear expressing; achieve a writing speed of approximately 300–400 words within thirty minutes; produce a thesis of 3000-5000 words in length with a clear structure, solid content and coherent expressing." In order to meet these teaching objectives, students must complete many kinds of English writing tasks, including reading reports, short essays, and English thesis.

Writing ability is a very necessary skill for students. However, many English learners face difficulties in English writing. Some common difficulties include surface-level problems in vocabulary and grammar.

Lin (2015) investigated 20 English as a Second Language (ESL) students from different countries, studying in the United States. The author found that their writing difficulties can be categorized into three: the first one is difficulties in linguistic/cognitive aspects. This difficulty covers choosing words or idioms, grammar issues, sentence structure, spelling problems, organizing sentences and paragraphs, statements, and conclusion, pauses in writing, writing skills, etc. The second difficulty is psychological/emotional deficiency, such as anxiety and self-confidence. The third is the sociocultural aspect, including adjusting to the American thinking pattern.

Similarly, Bulqiyah et al. (2021) did an explanatory study to investigate the writing difficulties of Indonesian tertiary students. The authors divided students' difficulties into three categories according to the results of the interview: affective problems (i.e., students' and lecturers' attitudes), cognitive problems (i.e., writing process, ideas in writing, language transferring from L1 to English) and linguistic problems.

Chinese students also face the writing difficulties mentioned above when they write in English. For example, Xiao and Chen (2013) surveyed more than 200 non-English majors' college students and found that participants' difficulties in English writing mainly in three aspects: linguistic, content, and structure. Among these, "the biggest difficulty they encountered was in content, followed by the aspect in linguistics. These students thought that they had relatively less difficulties in the organization of the essay's structure."

For Chinese students, the negative transfer of their mother tongue also brings certain difficulties to English writing. The phenomenon of transfer manifests in many aspects, such as conceptual ideas, syntax transfer, spelling skills, lexical studies, phonetics (Yang, 2019). Another common issue is that some students tend to think in Chinese when writing in English and then translate their ideas. For example, Ren and Wang's (2015) survey found that over 50% of the participants outlined their ideas first in Chinese and then translated. This indicates that students struggle to adjust to thinking in English. Additionally, students from different cultural backgrounds may face diverse writing difficulties.

3. Methods

Qualitative research is widely used for comprehending concepts, views, or experiences by gathering and analyzing non-numerical materials such as texts, audio, or video (Bhandari, 2020). A qualitative case study design was used in this investigation.

3.1 Research Instruments

The research instruments consist of two writing tasks and the retrospective interviews after writing. The five participants were required to write two essays on topics selected from the TOEFL independent writing test. Participants typed on laptops that had been prepared. A camera recorded the screen of the laptop during the writing process.

They took a short break after writing. Participants were encouraged to revise their texts freely in roughly 40 minutes. During this revision process after drafting, they were allowed to consult a dictionary or use online resources. The screen of the laptop during this process was recorded as well. The interval between the two writing tasks was three weeks, which means the second writing task was done three weeks after the implementation of the first one. Based on the existing studies, like Na and Yoon's (2016) study, three weeks is considered as an

appropriate interval to reduce the negative impact of repetitive writing on writers.

When participants finished revising, they could have a short break before the one-to-one interview. The interview primarily focused on their writing difficulties and their perspectives on English writing courses. The purpose of the interview was reviewed before it began. Each interview lasted about 50 minutes, and the audio was recorded through the voice recorder.

3.2 Participants

After obtaining ethical clearance, the researcher contacted the principal and other relevant administrators of the locale to ask permission to conduct this study. The researcher communicated with the teachers to identify and recruit participants according to the case selection technique. The study involved five participants with the pseudonyms: Wennie, Louis, William, Ruth and Ava. They are 21 to 22 years old, and had at least 15 years of English learning experience in school. There are 12 years of English learning experience at school from primary school to high school, including six years in primary school, three years in middle school, and three years in high school.

3.2.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Participants must be (1) enrolled in a writing class during the academic year 2023-2024 in the locale, (2) in the fourth year level in college, (3) an English major, (4) Chinese who are learning English as a foreign language for more than 15 years at least, (5) completers of all writing assignments and examinations in the writing class, (6) earners of at least a final grade of 85/100 in the writing course, and the scores are in the top three in their class, (7) passers of the Test for English Majors-Band 4 (TEM4) scored above 80; and passers of Test for English Majors-Band 8 (TEM8); (8) representatives of their college/university to complete a writing contest; or contestants/winners in writing contests in the school, district, regional, national or international level; (9) without studying and life experience in English speaking countries or regions. Potential participants who have attended or completed additional writing training and workshops outside school are to be excluded. Those who have taken the TOEFL test before are also to be excluded.

4. Statistical Analysis of Data

The transcripts of the interview, and the essays were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Table 1 below lists the steps.

Table 1. The steps of data analysis

Step	Description
Step 1 Familiarization with the data	The researcher reads all the interview transcripts and the essays repeatedly.
Step 2 Coding	The researcher marks recurring ideas corresponding to writing difficulties and their perspectives on writing courses in the interview transcript; and marks parts of the essays that exemplify their writing difficulties in the essays.
Step 3 Generating initial themes	The researcher looks for certain patterns in the codes or candidate themes.
Step 4 Reviewing themes	The researcher ensures that themes and data extracts match. The researcher refines the themes and develops them again.
Step 5 Defining and naming themes	The researcher describes each theme and assigns a catchy and informative label to each.
Step 6 Generating report	The researcher writes the report.

The researcher did an essential transcription of the interviews. And translated the transcripts of the interview. To ensure validity, an experienced college English teacher reviewed and validated the transcript and the translation. Furthermore, the researcher returned the results to participants for member checking, accuracy and feedback. The participants were able to check if the information in the written results were consistent with their real situation in the tasks and if they had recommendations.

5. Results and Discussion

This section has two parts: participants' writing difficulties and participants' perspectives on English writing courses.

5.1 Writing Difficulties

Through the writing tasks and interviews, the researcher found that the participants have some common difficulties in their writing process. These difficulties are categorized into five themes: construction of the writing content, coherence and cohesion, insufficient linguistic knowledge, difficulties in applying writing theories to writing practices, and difficulties caused by time constraints. Table 2 below shows the writing difficulties at a glance.

Table 2. Participants' writing difficulties

Theme	Definition
1. The difficulties of constructing writing content	Participants found difficulty in generating content, developing ideas, and providing arguments and examples to support perspectives about unfamiliar themes.
2. The difficulties in coherence and cohesion	Participants found difficulty in ensuring unity or oneness of content, connecting the ideas and sentences smoothly, and writing supporting statements.
3. Insufficient linguistic knowledge	Participants found difficulty in knowing and using the right vocabulary and using the right idiomatic expressions; revising wrong or repetitive words, groups of words and grammar.
4. The difficulties to apply writing theories to writing practices	Participants found difficulty in integrating the theories they learned in their actual writing.
5. The difficulties caused by time constraint	Participants found difficulty in managing allotted time for writing.

Theme 1: The difficulties of constructing writing content

The five participants emphasized that content generation is their main challenge in English writing. Ruth said, "One of my main writing challenges is the difficulty of generating ideas. For myself at present, deciding what to write is even more difficult than creating sentences by integrating words and phrases. I would like to compose this essay in five paragraphs. Before I start, I must draw up the outline. I wouldn't know what to write if I didn't have a framework in my mind, so I had to decide what the content of each paragraph was before I started writing. Apart from the opening paragraph and the ending paragraph, each of the three intermediate paragraphs needs to explain one point."

Ruth used an analogy to describe her process of generating writing content: "The process of forming my opinions/my thoughts is like fishing in the vast ocean. I had no idea what kind of fish I might catch as I couldn't see the fish. Nevertheless, I wanted to catch the best fish so that I could cook a super dish. Writing ideas are like the raw materials for cooking and writing itself is like the act of cooking. The problem is that the viewpoints and ideas that I can come up with are rather limited. For me, catching fish in the ocean is more difficult than cooking at the present stage of my language learning. If I am not satisfied with the fish I catch, I will pick a few that I can prepare more easily from what I have caught. That is, I go with the ideas/thoughts that I am confident in expressing." To Wennie, the analogy is "It's like how easy it is for me to get lost when I'm walking in a completely strange place."

Furthermore, William elaborated his struggle with making strong supporting statements and giving examples. He explained, "In the fourth paragraph, I think the argument written at the end is not strong enough. I wrote that 'parents learn more from their children can easily overlook parents' roles in influencing children's emotional and psychological growth.' Here, I didn't explain how parents influence children's emotional and psychological growth. I just went straight to the result, and I skipped over the specific processes leading to it." "There is another example in the essay: 'parents consistently pass down values, ethics, and traditions to the younger people.' Here, I didn't mention how parents pass these down to their children. I think the essay would be richer and more cohesive if the arguments could be transitioned with more details. But I couldn't think of any more details on my own within the given time." William's reflections highlighted his challenges with coherence and cohesion, particularly in developing and supporting his arguments with sufficient details.

Wennie's difficulty is, however, rooted in the angle she approaches the topic. She said, "If I analyze the writing topic from an unusual or peculiar perspective or if I involve an unfamiliar argument to support my opinions, the writing content is likely to veer off-topic."

Meanwhile, Louis shared, "For those topics that I am not familiar with, I don't know much about the essential vocabulary or the topic's underlying knowledge. This is a significant barrier to my writing." He added "I have a plan in mind if I am given a topic I am familiar with. I may have come across related content online or in extracurricular reading materials, which helps me readily recall some specialized terms associated with the subject

matter.”

Xiao and Chen’s (2013) identified content generation as the most significant writing difficulty for their participants. The participants struggled to form and develop valuable, in-depth opinions or insights. Writers often found it challenging to create strong arguments or examples to support their ideas. Bulqiyah et al. (2021) and Toba et al. (2019) reported that Indonesian college students face similar writing difficulties when writing in English. Due to a lack of relevant background information, writers may feel hard to generate their own original ideas or perspectives on unfamiliar writing themes, and to develop their thoughts further. The lack of professional vocabulary related to the target topic is also a notable obstacle to their writing. Toba et al. (2019) mentioned that students believe their limited vocabulary also impacts their ability to translate or develop their ideas, as expressing thoughts needs the relevant words.

Several main reasons contribute to these difficulties with content. Firstly, students have limited life experience in the society due to their young age and they often lack a comprehensive understanding of the society, cognition and values. Ruth claimed that she finds it hard to immediately connect her life experiences to the writing topics. Secondly, there is often a lack of adequate reading or exposure to relevant background information on various topics, which may also be influenced by teaching methods and content. Thirdly, the participants are part of the society dominated by Confucian culture advocating collectivism. This cultural influence may weaken their sense of individuality and self-expression. For example, Ava noted that she rarely volunteers her thoughts in class. Afifi (2014) also analyzed the similar influence of their social culture on Indonesian writers’ voices. Writing may be influenced by many factors, including social culture.

Theme 2: The difficulties in coherence and cohesion

Participants deem that coherence and cohesion are very important in writing, but they are not always able to observe them.

According to Louis, “When I used to write, I would occasionally write one sentence and then forget the meaning of the previous sentence by the time I wrote the next one. I felt that the content of the last sentence didn’t connect with the following smoothly.”

In addition, William stated, “I didn’t know how to construct the following sentence when I realized that the meaning of the first and second sentences slightly overlapped as I was writing the second paragraph. At that moment, I felt that my brain couldn’t keep up. If the arguments don’t connect well and flow smoothly, the logic of the content will be broken down. This is a significant issue that I’m experiencing with my writing, and it is very difficult to overcome.”

William also claimed that while he focused on the whole structure of the essay and the relationships between paragraphs before writing, but during writing, he focused more on the internal logic between sentences. Below is an excerpt from William’s. Below is an excerpt from William’s essay for task 2.

Furthermore, announcing that parents learn more from their children can easily overlook parents’ roles in influencing children’s emotional and psychological growth. As moral models and spiritual guidance, parents consistently pass down values, ethics, and traditions to the younger people. Such transmission guarantees that family virtues are preserved, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity.

In addition, Ava said: “I think my writing in the past was verbose and illogical.” Though wordy, her writing ideas do not observe unity. “In my writing exercises, I consciously attach more attention to the connection between the preceding and following sentences. For example, after I finish writing a sentence, I often reflect the internal logic among it and the sentences around it, and I also consider the relationship between this sentence and the whole essay.

In these two writing tasks, the writer’s specific difficulties in coherence and cohesion are also reflected in the relationship between their use of cohesion devices and the theme or the logic of the essay. For example, Ava met a problem in task 1.

Ava explained, “Initially, I used ‘first of all’ at the beginning of the second paragraph and used ‘secondly’ at the beginning of the third paragraph. However, in the third paragraph, I needed to discuss the advantages of ‘discussion and projects’ in two aspects, so I needed to use ‘first of all’ and ‘secondly’ again in the middle of the third paragraph. But I know that it is not ideal to use them twice in an essay. So I replaced ‘first of all’ with ‘on the one hand’ at the beginning of the second paragraph and replaced ‘secondly’ with ‘on the other hand’ at the start of the third paragraph. This allowed me to use ‘firstly’ and ‘secondly’ in the middle of the third paragraph. By the way, if this were written on paper, it would be troublesome to make such changes accidentally on existing text.” From the writers’ feedback, we could find that their writing difficulties in coherence and logic are reflected in the logical

connection of content among paragraphs or sentences, the use of conjunctions or transitional words, the development of arguments and reasoning of ideas. This aligns with Sang (2017)'s review about Chinese ESL college students' similar problems in this aspect.

The reason for the issue is not only tied to the curriculum, but also to the language learning environment of students. The college curriculum lacks emphasis on developing writing-related abilities, such as critical thinking and logical analysis. And the students lack the real language communication environment, making it difficult for them to adapt to the way of English thinking. Uba and Souidi (2020) also found that students struggle with coherence and the appropriate use of cohesive devices. And their findings implied that a lack of critical thinking can limit writers' ability to generate ideas and expand on writing topics. Ceylan (2019) suggests that students read more high-quality model papers to learn the methods for achieving coherence and then practice by imitating these techniques. Reading more will assist students in increasing their language input while learning about text structure and organization.

Theme 3: Insufficient linguistic knowledge

Despite passing the TEM8, all five participants acknowledged that they still have more room for improvement in accumulating linguistic knowledge and enhancing their application abilities. They admitted to being cautious about utilizing advanced vocabulary, unfamiliar words, uncommon phrases or complex syntax. They emphasized the importance of the accurate, diverse, and idiomatic language expression, but they often found it challenging to achieve their desired outcomes due to the limitations in language proficiency. And another common writing difficulty they identified was forgetting linguistic knowledge. It is common for ESL writers to forget how to use or spell certain words, and occasionally make mistakes in combining phrases.

Wennie shared with the researcher, "I think the sentences I wrote in this essay are generally common. Compared with the sentences I wrote in the past two or three years, these sentences are not varied enough or impressive. The sentences in this article are very basic and simple, probably because I am apprehensive about using advanced vocabulary and grammar for fear of making errors. For some words and phrases, I am not sure how to use them while writing."

Acknowledging her weakness in linguistic knowledge, Wennie tried a remedy saying, "I would like to use some sentences that are more advanced, but I couldn't come up with any. In task 2, 'First and foremost, parents is [sic] the generation having much more experience than their children.' I decided to use 'is' after the subject 'parents', but I also considered using 'belongs to' which seems not more appropriate than 'is' here. I prefer to use a more advanced and idiomatic verb (than 'is' or 'belongs to'), but I do not know what the word should be as my vocabulary is insufficient. Some of the words are unfamiliar to me, so I can't find or think of or find the appropriate ones to express my thoughts."

Wennie elaborated that her struggles with linguistic knowledge are occasional. She clarified, "On the one hand, sometimes I can't come up with more advanced expressions, or I dare not use advanced expressions to avoid mistakes. On the other hand, sometimes I think simple and brief sentences are good enough to make clear what I want to express. However, long and complex sentences may sometimes make the text look verbose."

In addition, Ruth shared, "I always attempt to present the meaning clearly in words to ensure that potential readers can easily understand and avoid confusion. I am used to writing in flowery or convoluted sentences. Once I grab one great writing idea, the first thing I think about is how to express it concisely." While Ruth knows the importance of clarity, she recognizes that achieving it remains a work in progress.

Ruth reckoned, "I always use attributive clauses subconsciously, which has become a writing habit of mine. This is not a bad thing, but other sentence patterns are really used less, such as inverted sentences which I use rarely. This leads to the sentence structure in my texts appearing somewhat monotonous. Some grammar lessons I have learned and mastered well (that means I can complete the relevant grammar exercises successfully), but I don't use them often in writing. Gradually I may forget them, and as a result, I might fail to incorporate them into my writing."

The postgraduate students from Jordanian who studied in Malaysia also encountered similar difficulties in their academic writing. Almatarneh (2018) discussed that nearly 95.5% of postgraduate students from Jordanian avoid using complex words in their writing, choosing simpler words (which were used frequently sometimes) instead. Toba et al. (2019) investigated 52 English students' writing problems in an Indonesian college and learned that the vocabulary issues took the least proportion of all their writing problems, compared to problems in other aspects like content, organization, mechanics and grammar.

Linguistic difficulties are very common among ESL writers at any level. One major cause is writers' limited

language knowledge. Another reason is that they have difficulty applying what they have learned to the specific writing topics due to a lack of practice. For instance, writers often struggle to recall what they have learned in writing (Sang, 2017).

A part of the post-writing stage in writing is revising. This phase is necessary to improve the written output, but it can also pose challenges. For example, writers often aim to avoid repetition of particular words or phrases to ensure the linguistic diversity in their essays. On the other hand, they may not readily know synonyms or alternative expressions, which can consume additional time. Ruth addressed this concern. “Sometimes I can’t produce texts with diverse sentences instantly due to my limited language ability during writing.”

Meanwhile, William declared, “When I think about what to write, I usually translate my writing ideas into simple English sentences, then expand on them as needed. I know how to express my thoughts in Chinese, but sometimes I can’t find the equivalent words in English. In such cases, I may paraphrase the target word with another appropriate synonymous phrase, but sometimes I have to repeat a word again and again when I fail to find one [to substitute it with].”

Wennie shared a similar experience: “When I think about what to write, my thinking process is almost entirely in Chinese, and the writing output is equivalent to a translation product for me. In the process I inevitably face difficulties in conveying what I want to express.” These verified Sang’s (2017) review of Chinese ESL college students’ problems caused by negative transfer of Chinese language. The accurate and effective use of the second language is challenging, especially when there are distinct differences between their mother tongue and target language.

Theme 4: Difficulties in applying writing theories to writing practices

All the five participants have taken writing classes and exams in college and gained some theoretical knowledge about writing. They are familiar with the various writing assessment criteria and requirements for the writing classes or the different English tests very well. As they are student writers, they are highly motivated to produce high-quality essays that meet the grading standards. However, they often find it challenging to apply some of the theoretical knowledge they have acquired to their actual writing practice.

Ava shared, “When I read some excellent sample essays or literature works, I can identify the rhetorical devices or other techniques used by the authors, and I could understand that those devices or techniques add luster to their texts.” However, in actual writing practice, the participants frequently struggle to incorporate their theoretical knowledge into the writing practice. Ava explained, “I rarely use stylistic devices, like metaphors, puns, and alliterations in my writing. Some of which I have never used, and I don’t know how to use them effectively to produce the expected texts. I remember I tried to use some before, but I was dissatisfied with the outcome. In fact, I have learned some theoretical knowledge in this area, but my actual output falls far short of my writing goals.” When asked why applying theory is such a struggle, Ava reflected, “I think maybe it’s due to my lack of practical practice, or perhaps it stems from my limited grasp of this knowledge.”

The participants in Chen’s (2021) study also highlighted the importance of writing practice. The insufficiency of effective writing practice is a common concern of many ESL writers. More than half of the participants in Li and Zeng’s (2019) study reported feeling they lacked writing practice at the university. Most of their participants have little knowledge of rhetorical devices, and they were not aware of how to use them effectively. Bulqiyah et al. (2021) indicated that the fewer students who practice writing, the more difficulties they face in writing.

Theme 5: Difficulties caused by time constraint

Throughout the writing process, the participants monitored their time and word count, often feeling anxious about completing their essays within the prescribed time. This time pressure negatively impacted the quality of their writing. In the time-limited tasks, they don’t have enough time to make a full and detailed writing plan. Sometimes time constraints hindered writers’ ability to carefully address the linguistic issues, text organization and revising (Sarwat et al., 2021). These limitations significantly affected the quality of their writing products.

According to Ava, “I usually take a few minutes to think or plan before writing, creating a general outline first. However, during the writing process, I may revise my initial plan, and I have to pause again and again to think about what to write next. I spend a considerable amount of time developing arguments to support my views, which leaves less time for language organization and refinement. I tend to prioritize expressing my thoughts over focusing on the external form of language in the time-limited tasks, which can sometimes result in less polished writing.”

The same concern over time affected Ruth who shared, “At the beginning, I struggled to figure out how to begin the essay, and I paused for a long time to craft the opening sentence. It took me about 15 minutes to write the first paragraph, which consumed nearly half of the allotted writing time. The poor time allocation made me feel anxious

and nervous. Since the task required at least 300 words, I must meet the requirement just like I do for regular exams.”

Ruth noted that some task-specific rules hindered her from revising more effectively: “I often refer to dictionaries in my writing exercises. But in the time-limited writing task, using a dictionary or searching for materials online is generally not allowed.” These rules made her feel anxious.

Louis had some observations to the time-limited writing task. He explained, “Grammatically, there is no problem using ‘improve’ here, but I believe that if I had more time to complete the writing task, I would probably use some more advanced words instead of ‘improve.’ When I revised the text after writing, I changed ‘improve’ to ‘facilities.’ When I work on a time-limited writing assignment, I might stick with ‘improve’ simply, since I wouldn’t have enough time to think of a better word. I think it depends on how familiar I am with certain words or phrases.” Just like Wennie, Louis also attempted to address his language limitations but cited the time pressure as a factor. An extract from Louis’ task 1 essay is below.

Thirdly, the action of teachers’ spending more time on developing activities like discussion can take an important role in facilitating the reform of traditional teaching method [sic] and creating a macro-level beneficial educational environment for students.

5.2 Participants’ Perspectives on English Writing Course

This section details the participants’ perspectives on English writing courses. They all agreed that the writing instruction in school positively influenced their writing skills. They gained valuable writing knowledge and training experience from their writing classes. However, they also identified several issues with the current English writing courses.

They hope that teachers could involve more concrete examples when they introduce writing theories in class. They emphasized the importance of providing ample opportunities for students to apply the theoretical knowledge gained in lectures or books to their writing practice. This aims to avoid the issue that students learned the related theory but they are not able to use it in practice at all. They need more diverse writing exercises, including both in and out of class activities. Since classroom activities are time-limited, whereas students can have more time for exercises out of class (Na & Yoon, 2016).

Louis pointed out the specific limitations of writing classes in terms of the genre being taught and being exam-oriented. He lamented, “Argumentative writing is the most common style in our normal writing exams, so I am very familiar with the structure and pattern of argumentative essays. However, I feel challenged when it comes to writing prose, poems, or novels in English in life. I expect that the writing class could cover a variety of genres to help improve my overall writing ability.” “The setting of the writing courses should not be exam-oriented. Instead, they should support students’ holistic and well-coordinated development rather than focusing solely on exams.” added Louis.

Louis’ reflections underscore the certain gap between current writing courses and students’ needs. It is urgent to improve the curriculum by updating textbooks and teaching methods. The administrators should prioritize continuity and the sequence of writing courses to better support students’ long-term development.

Wennie also recommended incorporating more thought-provoking questions in textbooks or courses to encourage in-depth discussion between students and teachers about the target topics. Such questions could help students form and articulate their own ideas, thereby broadening their perspectives. The participants noted that the total number of hours allocated to writing classes is insufficient, as improving writing ability requires a long period of continuous training. They emphasized the importance of a curriculum comprising a series of coherent writing courses. They also expressed concern about the lack of such courses, which limits opportunities for them to develop writing ability and other essential related skills.

Sang (2017) also wrote that some teaching practices focus only on preparing students for exams. Sang (2017) pointed out that “the continuity of English writing instruction through one semester and through undergraduate English education in many Chinese universities cannot be guaranteed.” These problems exist not only in English writing, actually they are common issues in English teaching. Maarof and Munusamy (2015) also discussed the same issues in their ESL teaching and learning.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the writing difficulties of five Chinese English majors through two writing tasks and retrospective interviews; and discussed the primary causes of these writing difficulties. Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. These difficulties were categorized into five themes: construction of the writing

content, coherence and cohesion, insufficient linguistic knowledge, difficulties in applying writing theories to writing practices, and difficulties caused by time constraints. The participants also shared their perspectives about the English writing courses emphasizing the addition of more genres beyond argumentative writing, actual writing practice over objective examinations, and the need for improved textbooks.

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