

Why Does My English Writing Sound So Chinese?

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Proceedings of the CATESOL State Conference, 2006

This paper focuses on the rhetorical differences between Chinese and English writing that may influence how Chinese ESL students write in English. I will categorize the differences between Chinese and English rhetoric by comparing two sample essays adopted from Eason (1995) – Essay #1 (Appendix A) is in the Chinese style and Essay #2 (Appendix B) is in the English style (see Chen, 2005, for a more thorough literature review). The categories are listed from structural (e.g., the ways to approach the topic) to content differences (e.g., the sources of citation).

The first difference is basic composition structure. The basic English composition structure is characterized as “introduction-body-conclusion” and the Chinese structure is characterized as “beginning-following-turning-concluding” (*qi-cheng-zhuan-he*).

For example, in Essay #2, the first paragraph introduces the theme: two potential problems indicating that it is unhelpful for elementary school students to have English courses at school. The following two paragraphs serve as the body of the entire essay, which further elaborates on those two problems. The fourth paragraph is the conclusion which asks readers to continue pondering over this issue.

Different from the structure of Essay #2, that of Essay #1 is beginning-following-turning-concluding (*qi-cheng-zhuan-he*). *Qi* means the *beginning* of an essay, in which there is a topic partly related to the theme (Hinds, 1990). The role of *cheng* is to *follow* the beginning paragraph and amplify it. In the third part, *zhuan*, the whole essay *turns* in another direction. That is, the topic introduced in the beginning and following paragraphs will be addressed from a

different perspective, which aims at surprising the reader. The whole essay also reaches a climax at this point. The last paragraph, *he*, is to *conclude* the previous paragraph with a particular point which refers to the theme of the essay. A good ending paragraph is powerful and speedy, providing the reader with a great insight and also some space to ponder the theme. This basic structure has been used in Chinese poetry and prose for centuries.

For example, in Essay #1, *Qi*, the first paragraph, introduces a topic (the importance of learning English) related to the theme (potential problems of having English courses at the elementary school). *Cheng*, the next paragraph, argues that since learning English is significant, it will be beneficial for children to learn it as early as possible. In the third paragraph, the essay *turns* to elaborate on the potential problems of having children learn English too early, which opposes the previous two paragraphs. The last paragraph, *he*, concludes by referring to the theme: teaching elementary students English could cause detrimental effect on them.

The second rhetorical difference between Chinese and English is that to English readers, Chinese writing seems to delay the introduction of the theme, while to Chinese readers, English writing seems to introduce the theme too early. As Essay #1 shows, the thesis is placed in the last paragraph. On the other hand, in Essay #2, the thesis statement is the last sentence in the first paragraph.

The third rhetorical difference is the way of organizing thinking in composition. Generally, the way of organizing a Chinese writer's thinking may be inductive (Yang, 2001) or "quasi-inductive" (Hinds, 1990, p. 87) in contrast to the deductive style typical of English writers (Wang, 1992). For

example, in Essay #1, the author first mentions specific details for the following main argument and then proposes her/his main argument as a conclusion. Conversely, in Essay #2, the author proposes her/his main argument first and provides specific supporting details afterwards. To English readers, the paragraph development in Chinese inductive writing is comparatively indirect.

The fourth rhetorical difference is the conclusion. In a Chinese composition, the conclusion tends to end with a statement unrelated to the thesis. For example, in the last sentence of Essay #1, the author mentions adults' responsibility to give children a bright future, which is virtually unrelated to the thesis. In an English composition, the conclusion tends to reassert the thesis in different words as we can see in Essay #2.

The fifth rhetorical difference is the tone of writing. The tone of Chinese writing can be characterized as being reserved, while that of English writing is straightforward. This can be explained from a cultural perspective. From a Chinese reader's point of view, being reserved is seen as humility, which a good writer should possess. When a Chinese tries to voice her or his own opinions, she or he is not expected to express opinions directly. Instead, it is necessary to keep distance from the readers with a soft tone. That's why to English readers, the theme in Essay #1 may be ambiguous. It is hard for them to tell if the author supports or opposes teaching English at elementary schools. In contrast, the theme in Essay #2 is directly addressed since the beginning paragraph.

The sixth rhetorical difference is that Chinese is considered a reader-responsible language, while English is considered a writer-responsible one. Wang (1994) gave a good explanation of the concept of

writer/reader responsible language:

Compared to English readers, Chinese readers are not only responsible for reading essays but also for feeling and interpreting them to understand the deeper meanings and appreciate the artistic beauty. English writing requires the writer to make the ideas clear while Chinese writing prefers the writer to make the ideas impressive, lively and even suggestive. (p. 223)

This may explain why Chinese writing tends to impress the reader with the *turning* paragraph. Also, a delayed introduction to the theme is proper in Chinese writers since the reader will enjoy interpreting the writer's intention. On the other hand, an effective English essay clearly shows the reader the way to the main argument. That is why there are a thesis statement and topic sentences to help the reader clearly understand the writer's main argument. It is as if the writer uses road signs to guide the reader to a conclusion.

The seventh difference is contrasting values. The differences between Chinese and English writing may be due to different beliefs: collectivism and individualism (Wu & Rubin, 2000). To Chinese, maintaining a harmonious interpersonal relationship is very important. Also, it is natural for Chinese to believe that they live for not only themselves but also the society. Therefore, as the last sentence of Essay #1 shows, Chinese writers tend to call for the collective good. In contrast, Westerners tend to express their voice without worrying about breaking harmony with others because individual rights are highly recognized in Western society.

The eighth difference is the use of personal anecdotes. Wu and Rubin's (2000) investigation of 40 Taiwanese and 40 American college student essays revealed that American students discussed personal anecdotes much more frequently than their Taiwanese counterparts. American students tended to use their personal stories to support their argument, which was hardly seen in Taiwanese student essays. In Essay #2, the author talks about his/her experience of suffering from test-oriented English classes, while the author in Essay #1 does not mention his/her personal experience.

The ninth difference is the use of person pronouns. Chinese ESL students tend to overuse the first person plural pronoun *we* when the first person singular pronoun *I* is more appropriate, which can be shown in Essay #1. Using the first person plural pronoun without specifically mentioning whom it refers to would be considered ineffective in English writing. *We* is too vague. Recognizing the audience in English writing is very important. Before starting to write an essay, it is important to take into account of the audience's knowledge about the topic, their interest, stance and so on (VanderMey et al., 2004).

The last rhetorical difference is the use of well-known Chinese quotations. Chinese writers tend to cite proverbs, maxims, and fixed phrases in their writing while English writers tend to use original diction (Wu & Rubin, 2000). If a Chinese writer can use a great deal of well-known Chinese quotations in his or her writing, he or she will be considered knowledgeable. For example, Chinese ESL students may tend to use *as the saying goes*, (Yang, 2001) as we can see in Essay #1.

When teaching Chinese ESL students, writing instructors need to be aware of the aforementioned

differences between Chinese and English rhetoric. As mentioned above, Chinese rhetoric is very likely to interfere with Chinese speakers' use of English rhetoric. Thus, by possessing the knowledge of contrastive rhetoric between Chinese and English, ESL writing instructors can guide their students to become aware of these rhetorical differences and improve their English writing.

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Appendix A

Essay #1 (Chinese style)

Is it helpful for elementary school students to have English courses at school?

[1] As we know, English has assumed greater significance in Taiwan since we entered the World Trade Organization (WTO). This historic event has increased our economic and trade cooperation with a great number of foreign companies. If we are able to speak English fluently, we will have greater opportunities to do business with these companies.

[2] Raising Taiwanese people's English proficiency is a task that we shall not wait for even one quarter. If we wait, we miss the opportunities to do business with foreign establishments and to become a member of global village. Other countries are learning English diligently so we can not fall behind them. Since the situation is urgent, why don't we let our next generation learn English as early as possible? A Chinese saying goes, "Don't lose at the starting point." Life is a race with others. If our children can start earlier than others, they will be more likely to succeed in their lives.

[3] Nonetheless, a Chinese proverb goes, "We help seedlings grow by tugging them." As we all know, if we push our children too hard to learn a subject, they will be exhausted physically and mentally and end up losing motivation for learning this subject. If we push our children to learn a new language too hard while they are on the way to acquire their first language, they will be under unbearable pressure and their motivation will be gone like those seedlings. Furthermore, junior and senior high schools face numerous issues in regard to teaching English. For example, English classes are test-oriented. Students want to learn how to score high points on the English test rather than to learn to communicate. There are over 50 students in a teacher-centered class so most students do not have the chance to practice their English speaking skill. These issues may also arise if English were taught in elementary schools.

[4] Some people assert it is important to teach elementary students English. If we attempt to have English classes in elementary schools, we need to take many issues into consideration. Otherwise, we will spend 100 percent of our efforts and achieve only 50 percent of effectiveness. After all, what parents and schools love to see is the elementary schoolchildren having a rewarding experience of learning English. We have to always remember that it is our full responsibility to give our next generation a bright future. (Adopted from Eason, 1995, p. 280)

Appendix B

Essay #2 (English style)

Is it helpful for elementary school students to have English courses at school?

[1] Have you ever heard a slogan, “No English, no school!” This slogan indicates an increasing phenomenon of English classes at Taiwanese private kindergartens and elementary cram schools. If these two types of schools do not provide English courses, they are unlikely to recruit any students. Witnessing this situation, the Taiwanese Ministry of Education is planning to incorporate English classes into the elementary school curriculum since there are English classes from junior high schools to universities and numerous students (from kindergartens to universities) are learning English already. However, learning English at elementary schools is at stake. In fact, there are two potential problems which indicate that it is unhelpful for elementary school students to have English courses at school.

[2] One problem is that a test-oriented English class in high school is very likely to happen in elementary schools, which will bring undue pressure to bear on elementary schoolchildren. Students’ right to receive proper education will be damaged again. In Taiwan, most English classes in high schools adopt the grammar-translation method. Teachers try to *cram* English into students’ brains with rigid teaching principles. When I was learning English as a high school student, my teachers taught me to learn English by rote so that I would score high points in the English test. I struggled to memorize six volumes of textbooks (approximately 72 lessons). To me, learning English was not a joy but three years of torture. Unfortunately, most classes in elementary schools also adopt rote learning. Elementary schoolchildren may suffer from the same torture as I did if English is incorporated into the curriculum. They should have the right to refuse stressful learning experiences brought by test-oriented classes.

[3] Furthermore, learning English during childhood is actually detrimental to elementary school students’ acquisition of Chinese. Although the critical period (approximately from birth to puberty) is the optimal time to learn a new language, due to the immaturity of elementary pupils’ mother tongue, learning a new language may interfere with the development of their first language. Elementary school pupils’ native language of Chinese is not fully developed at this point. If they learn English during their childhood, they will have difficulty in mastering Chinese. Thus, it is not appropriate to teach students English until they possess sufficient knowledge of Chinese.

[4] In conclusion, having English courses in elementary schools has two aforementioned conceivable problems. Students will not only be under pressure but also be unable to acquire Chinese well. Aside from these two, other potential problems regarding this issue would also need to be taken into consideration. (Adopted from Eason, 1995, p. 280)