

THE IMPACT OF NATIVE CULTURAL BACKGROUND ON ENGLISH WRITING FOR  
CHINESE EFL LEARNERS

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THE IMPACT OF NATIVE CULTURAL BACKGROUND ON ENGLISH WRITING FOR  
CHINESE EFL LEARNERS

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## **Abstract**

### **THE IMPACT OF NATIVE CULTURAL BACKGROUND ON ENGLISH WRITING FOR CHINESE EFL LEARNERS**

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This literature review examines published articles that report upon the impact of different philosophical cultures underlying English academic writing for Chinese EFL learners. Scholarly writing on this subject shows that the logic underpinning written expression is not universal but culture-bound. This lack of academic cultural awareness results in the gap between the writing of qualified English learners in China and their failure in academic writing in English speaking countries. In English-speaking countries, professors in the field of rhetoric and composition theory, drawing upon the traditions of Plato and Aristotle, teach that a good English composition is a well-organized structure with a clear topic and straightforward supporting examples and illustrations. Meanwhile, traditional Chinese writing encourages beautiful expressions that allude to the works of experts without directly stating them and prefer more painterly writing based upon Confucian aesthetics. Since many students in China seek successful academic careers in native English-speaking countries, this paper suggests that teachers of college English in China take actions to adjust their teaching strategies for how to write academic English essays based on the very different philosophical traditions of the respective cultures.

**Keywords:** *English academic writing, Chinese EFL learner, cultural awareness, Rhetoric and Composition theory, Confucian aesthetics*

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## Chapter I: Introduction

My colleague, Ms. Wang, was a bit annoyed when her daughter, who was studying in the US as an undergraduate student, told her that a professor commented her essay as “too flowery”. As an experienced teacher of College English, Ms. Wang has been teaching English to non-English majors for many years. She teaches an integrated course in English listening, speaking, reading and writing. She was quite satisfied with that essay since she helped edit it for the daughter based on some general criteria for English writing, which are set in the Syllabus of College English Test Band 4 (CET band 4) and accepted by all the Chinese teachers of College English in Mainland China. Her daughter is typical of many Chinese learners abroad. When Chinese students go abroad in pursuit of world-recognized academic degrees in English speaking countries, especially in the United States, they often find out that their writings do not fit to the demands of native English professors.

It should be noted that many of these Chinese students have passed CET band 4 and met the requirements of Chinese College education for English. With sufficient vocabulary and syntactic structures, they are relatively competent in the English language but cannot compose qualified academic writing in native English-speaking countries. Meanwhile, the reaction of my colleague, Ms. Wang, reflects the confusion of some Chinese teachers of English in China. What makes the gap between qualified learners in China and their failure in academic writing abroad? Although the reasons may be many, this paper is meant to explore the cultural factors only.

Robert Kaplan’s seminal article on “Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Communication” (1966) pointed out that logic was not universal but culture-bound. Moreover, logic in western philosophy falls under the general field of rhetoric, the use of language to persuade, and so when Socrates, Plato and Aristotle discuss logic they often explicitly tie it to

how a person should both think and how that person should express himself. This makes logic is an inevitable part in standards of writing in countries where academic writing is grounded in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. In the United States, this philosophy permeates the field called Rhetoric and Composition theory, the area of focus of those who teach college writing.

As Kaplan and then later scholars point out, learners from different cultural backgrounds are very likely to show different preferences of expressing themselves. This becomes more pronounced in academic settings because academicians by definition have learned more about the cultural background they are writing in and that culture's philosophical tradition shapes what sounds learned and sophisticated as opposed to unknowledgeable and base. For instance, within traditional Chinese academic culture, critical thinking at least in terms of breaking things down into logical components then giving examples is not regarded as an essential element. In *The Analects* (Lun Yü), which is a collection of Confucian sayings and the only reliable record of his philosophy, the first saying from Chapter Seven highlights this idea. The Master said, "A transmitter and not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients, I venture to compare myself with our old P'ang." This saying shows Confucius's opinion that an excellent writer should not strive to create his own new ideas as he pleases. Instead, he is urged to state and explain—though not necessarily take apart or analyze—what ancient people expressed in classical works. This philosophy undoubtedly lead Chinese standards for academic writing in a different direction than that of western philosophy.

## **Statement of the Problem**

This paper examines the relationship between Chinese EFL learners' native cultural background and the cultural background of English academic writing by answering the following research questions:

1. How do English cultures and Chinese cultures define good writing respectively?
2. How does cultural background and cultural awareness affect EFL learners in their English writing?
3. What can Chinese EFL teachers and learners do to help those learners improve their English writing?

## **Definition of Terms**

*Chinese EFL learners:* English learners who are living and studying in Mainland China.

*CET band 4:* CET is an abbreviation for the College English Test, which is a national English test for non-English majors in College in Mainland China. There are two levels in CET, band 4 and band 6. Non-English majors in college are required to learn English of level I through level IV. Correspondingly, they are supposed to pass band 4 after the completion of learning College English IV.

*Confucianism* has been defined as an aesthetic, a philosophy, a way of governing, and a way of life, based upon the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius. It is by far the dominant philosophical tradition in China.

*Rhetoric and composition theory:* rhetoric is the use of language to persuade which in the west traditionally descends from Plato and Aristotle; Rhetoric and composition theory have become the field of academic study that in English-speaking countries is related to the teaching of



academic writing.

*L2*: A speaker's second language, which in this paper refers to English as spoken by native Chinese speakers.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

Chinese EFL learners struggle to understand why their academic writing in English sounds inappropriate to native English-speaking professors. Chinese teachers of English at the college level want their students to succeed if they study abroad and often wonder why their students' English writing, even when grammatically sound, is not acceptable to American professors. The literature review will investigate whether and how native cultural background affects Chinese EFL learners' English writing.

The paper investigates whether and how native cultural background affects Chinese EFL learners' academic English writing. By reviewing literature and analyzing the current situation of English writing courses in China, this paper aims to provide suggestions for Chinese EFL learners and teachers to improve their cultural awareness via noticing the influence of cultural background and accordingly adjust their learning/teaching strategies in English writing to serve the interests of those students with intention of further academic study abroad.

This study will help Chinese EFL teachers and learners, those who will pursue academic study abroad in particular, to have a better understanding of the role native Chinese culture plays in achievement in English academic writing. Chinese EFL teachers are generally committed to their students' English learning, especially in writing, but they lack theoretical and practical guidance on students' English writing instruction. Moreover, they come from a very different philosophical tradition, and those different traditions may be the "hidden influence" that makes a

paper that seems excellent in one culture not acceptable in the other. With the help of adequate knowledge about cultural influence on English writing, Chinese EFL teachers and learners can both find the way to develop English writing to serve those learners who intend to study abroad in an English-speaking country.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

References to Chinese EFL learners in this paper are to those who are college level or above, especially those who intend to pursue further study in English speaking country. So, the result of this study may not be generalizable to other learners.

### **Methodology**

Library research has been conducted to address the stated problems. Related books and peer-reviewed journal articles have been collected, reviewed, and discussed with professors both in the United States and China. References have been mainly collected from online scholarly electronic databases, such as JSTOR, ERIC, Google scholar, or Project Muse. Research has also been informed by the writer's experience as an EFL teacher in China and a visiting scholar at UW-Platteville.

## **Chapter II: Different Criteria of Good Writing in English and Chinese Cultures**

The groundbreaking research of Kaplan (1966) pointed out a common sense among sociologists and anthropologists that logic was not universal but culture-bound. Since then, numerous researchers have conducted theoretical or empirical studies on the differences in the criteria of good writing between English and Asian cultures, especially U.S. and Chinese cultures. These features become most notable not in direct translation, but in expressing one's original or researched ideas in academic writing.

### **English Thought Patterns in Writing**

Kaplan (1966) claimed that English thought patterns presented a linear development, which was essentially a Platonic-Aristotelian sequence, descended from the philosophers of ancient Greece. He noted that "cultural differences in the nature of rhetoric supply the key to the difference in teaching approach" (p. 11). Because of this, Kaplan points out that good English writing usually showed a clear focus and organization, which was characterized by an explicit topic statement supported by straightforward examples and illustrations:

An English expository paragraph usually begins with a topic statement, and then, by a series of subdivisions of that topic statement, each supported by example and illustrations, proceeds to develop that central idea and relate that idea to all the other ideas in the whole essay, and to employ that idea in its proper relationship with the other ideas, to prove something, or perhaps to argue something. (pp. 13-14)

Most teachers of college English in China know that an expository paragraph should be constructed this way. What they may not know, we can infer from Kaplan, is the deep cultural history that this simple idea grows out of. This paper will return to that history shortly.

A number of researchers have shown their agreement to Kaplan in noting that American culture was influenced by Aristotelian thinking and thus professors encourage a linear logical structure supported by examples in academic writing. For example, Mirshafiei (1994) and Reichelt (2003) also reported that good construction was an importance factor in the evaluation of writing in English culture, although unlike Kaplan they did not look at the older cultural background (and Kaplan himself did not look at the older cultural background in China, but instead grouped together all Asian countries together and labeled them “Oriental.”)

In the next several decades, many researchers described English criteria of good writing in more details. As noted, Mirshafiei (1994) furthered Kaplan’s research, but focused more upon technical writing. His study was based on a questionnaire of 11 native students and 219 foreign students. The results reported in detail that precision, structure and objectivity were important factors in evaluation of a piece of writing in the U.S., although since the focus was technical rather than expository or research writing, one might expect and understand the lack of philosophical focus.

Fu & Townsend (1998) mentioned that clarity in expressing ideas featured a good native English writing. Reichelt (2003) stated that American teachers, with the focus on accuracy, good reasoning and support for assertions, remarked more about task adherence and originality than about beauty of expression. Brennan & Durovic (2005) suggested that cultural background provided the best explanation for the different understanding of plagiarism among students from “Confucian heritage” cultures that put a high value upon filial piety. Sundararajan (2012)

examined in detail the ways that Chinese writers of English valued a very different aesthetic than their native English-speaking counterparts, and that in particular they valued indirection and avoided direct statement.

### **Classical Western Rhetoric and the Teaching of Composition**

In addition, Kaplan's research may be at least partially confirmed simply by looking at what most U.S. graduate students in the field of Rhetoric and Composition Studies learn when they study the history of rhetoric, often defined as the use of language to persuade. In fact, graduate textbooks in Composition Studies such as *Re-Visioning Composition Textbooks: Conflicts of Culture, Ideology and Pedagogy* (Gale & Gale, 1999) regularly cite Kaplan's work.

The classical approach to western rhetoric as developed in ancient Greece and absorbed into the Roman world and Latin, became the measure for western universities from the European Middle Ages forward because Latin was the language used to communicate in universities across Europe. By the time universities existed in England and then in English-speaking countries, this philosophical tradition had become absorbed into how English speakers and writers were taught rhetoric. For example, Vaden (2016), author of a text looking at what teaching (English-language) composition entailed, gave this answer to the question "What should our students be able to do when they complete our training?" He said:

The classical approach to rhetoric, which developed over hundreds of years into a rich panoply of works from ancient times (e.g., Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Cicero's *De Inventiones*) and on into the Middle Ages (Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, Boethius' *Overview of the Structure of Rhetoric*, Erasmus' *Copia*:

*Foundations of the Abundant Style*), has helpfully been summarized in the form of the “five canons of rhetoric”: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery.

Vaden (2016) further notes that the last two are more appropriate for speaking, but the first three—invention, arrangement, and style—guide the study of written rhetoric and what teachers of the field now called “composition theory,” or how to teach college writing in English. Not surprisingly, Vaden quotes a translation of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (1355b, 22) to define rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” and then makes the very next sub-skill the ability to reason logically.

Gale & Gale (1999) note that “a standard aspect of Aristotelian [logical] argumentation in textbooks is the syllogism (p. 126), where deductive reasoning is taught by presenting a major premise, a minor premise, then a conclusion which logically follows. Let’s look at the most famous logical syllogism, from Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics*:

All men are mortal.

Socrates is a man.

Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Because Aristotle taught rhetoricians to explicitly set up logical categories, he privileges a logical system that states what may seem, to some, obvious. The idea is to state all parts of the logical connection. If the premises are true, the conclusion must be true.

However, this obvious statement would seem incredibly unartistic in Chinese, where implicit and subtle expressions are praised and individuals are trained to know what is meant at the covert or unexpressed level. The more someone states explicitly something that seems obvious, the more uneducated that person seems. Sometimes, explicit explanations are even considered insulting: an explicit statement implies that a reader is not knowledgeable or socialized well

enough to understand. To be explicit may be “citing a source” in English academic writing; allusions are usually saved for novels and poetry. Yet in Chinese writing, one assumes that the teacher should be able to catch the allusion and to inform one of it would be an insult.

Other English L2 writers in the United States have pointed out that English prefers a plain direct style more than many other western languages. U.S. Spanish-speaker and rhetorician Victor Villanueva (1993) points out that classical Latin rhetoric at some points did prefer more flowery expression and less Aristotelian logic but the type of writing that became preferred in English (as opposed to Spanish and Arabic) was more plain but logic-driven. Villanueva (1993) recalls that upon entering graduate school he would get paper after paper returned with one word written upon them: “Logic?” (p. 73). Villanueva traces the Spanish flair with flowery amplifying words back to Cicero 2000 years before but notes that these patterns were pushed out of English and even became suspicious-sounding to English speakers, while they continued in Spain (then in Spanish-speaking countries) and Arabia. Gale & Gale (1999), who build upon Kaplan (1966), also build upon Villanueva (1993), but none of these writers investigate the reasons behind different cultural expression in Chinese.

### **Chinese Writing Style and the Confucian Heritage**

There is a general consensus among researchers that, in criteria of good writing, Asian cultures exhibit immense differences from the linear development of English thought patterns with emphasis on clarity, objectivity and originality. Kaplan’s original study (1966) analyzed some six hundred foreign students’ compositions. The findings revealed different thought patterns and expressions in other linguistic systems. He found that Chinese writing made a feature of indirection and circular development. He observed that “Oriental” writers developed

the article around the subject “but the subject is never looked at directly” (p. 10). In fact, as stated, Kaplan himself had made no study of Chinese (or other Asian) rhetoric. Chinese academic writers circle around subjects because much of what’s stated is implicit, not explicit.

Chinese culture values the role art and literature plays in a society but values them differently than English-speaking cultures do. It is recorded in Chapter 17 of the *Analects* that the Master said,

My children, why do you not study the Book of Poetry? The Odes serve to stimulate the mind. They may be used for purposes of self-contemplation. They teach the art of sociability. They show how to regulate feelings of resentment. (17.9)

This points out the role of literary works, emphasizing the relation between art and personal emotions. Meanwhile, Confucianism persuades people to “seek relaxation and enjoyment in the six arts” (7.6). A Chinese Junzi (a refined gentleman) should wish “to be slow in his speech and earnest in his conduct” (4.24). The pursuit of enjoyment and harmony is also embodied in Chinese writing with a focus on the beauty of words and expressions as opposed to logic. To state this explicitly *in a way one would never do in graduate academic writing in China*: excellence in appreciating works of art leads to one becoming a good person who upholds social harmony. In the west, rhetoric is also supposed to lead to “goodness” (a “good man speaking well” is often seen as one mark of excellent rhetoric) but without as much stress on social harmony or filial piety, and rhetoric is not linked as often to poetic expression.

Many scholars since Kaplan’s time have kept his findings in mind and concentrated their study of the criterion of good writing on the comparison between Asian students and native English students. Typical representatives are Fu & Townsend (1998), Wang, Martin, Martin & Martin (2002), Marambe & Boshuizen (2012) and Ma (2018).



Fu & Townsend (1998) studied 13 Chinese graduate students, finding out that students with Chinese cultural values emphasized language form and artistic ability more than clarity in expressing ideas, which was obviously one of the essential evaluation factors of native English writers. The purpose of writing for Chinese writers was to show their mastery of the established forms, to demonstrate knowledge of classic literature and to display artistic ability. Using everyday language would be considered “ordinary” rather than a well-educated writer. When talking about cultural and historical reasons for the Chinese definition of good writing, Fu & Townsend quoted the idea from Chi Zhu, director of the composition and rhetoric department at Nanjing Teacher's University, who said, “Writing in ancient China never had any real practical values, nor was it used for true communication. It was like painting, only for entertainment or showing off craft skills (p. 129).” As a matter of fact, according to traditional Chinese standards, a gentleman--a person with refined characters--should show his pursuit of aesthetics in every aspect of life. Just like what is recorded in *The Analects* (Lunyu), Confucius “did not dislike to have his rice finely cleaned, nor to have his mince meat cut quite small. ... He did not eat meat which was not cut properly, nor what was served without its proper sauce.” In contrast, being original, using new language and avoiding clichés would be common requirement from native English writing teachers.

Wang *et al.* (2002) made a point that was in line with those in the study of Fu & Townsend (1998). They claim:

The purpose of Asian writing is to show the beauty of words and expressions. Asian students consider writing to be like painting. They spend most of their time selecting words and polishing structures rather than speculating, questioning, and exploring ideas (p. 99).

Marambe *et al.* (2012) also traced Asian cultural values back to the influence of Confucianism, in contrast to American culture which was influenced by Aristotelian philosophy. The researchers argued that Confucian values discouraged students from arguing with teachers. In Confucian heritage cultures, teachers are highly respected and considered as the center of the classroom with sole authority about what they teach. Students under such learning environment are supposed to follow the intellectual paths outlined by teachers. Disagreement with the authority should not be shown in a way of arguing. So, students do not dare to question authorities or express their own thoughts. Therefore, following the teachings of Confucianism, the Asian criteria of good writing didn't emphasize critical thinking, which was one of essential values in most English speaking world.

Another recent study carried out by Ma (2018) found out that things haven't changed much after these years. Emphasizing more on language form rather than on the idea is still common among Chinese L2 students today. The researcher interviewed 27 mainland Chinese L2 postgraduates at a university in Hong Kong on their conceptions of English academic writing. Most participants showed a strong tendency to highlight the lexical and grammatical features in the evaluation of their academic writing. The researcher made a reasonable conclusion to relate students' conceptions to their Chinese cultural background.

### **Where the Studies Agree**

As we have seen, many scholars have reached the agreement that cultural background can affect non-native English learners, and usually in an unfriendly way. They came to this conclusion from a variety of different studies.

In the questionnaire of the study of Mirshafiei (1994), both non-native and native students acknowledged that “cultures have an impact on their technical style, thinking process, and subjective and objective treatment of information (p. 278).” A majority of the foreign students in this study came from Middle East or Asia. The cultural influences of these students in their English writing were noticeable. For example, the author observed that writing of Arab, Afghani, Iranian, Indian, and Pakistani students usually showed exaggeration and generality, which was deeply rooted in their mother cultures. This matches the generalizations made by both Kaplan (1966) and Villanueva (1993) about writers from these cultural groups. Another tendency Mirshafiei reported was that some foreign students seemed to lack objectivity in reporting technical information in English, perhaps due to previous educational training in their mother cultures, where they were exposed to rote learning rather than analysis. Although the writing styles mentioned above could meet the expectations of audiences in those non-native learners’ home countries, these styles were not accepted by American teachers and caused a problem when those students studied in the United States.

In the article “Understanding Asian Graduate Students' English Literacy Problems,” Wang *et al.* (2002) criticized the way that many Asian countries encouraged students to memorize the classic literature rather than to challenge authorities in education. Asking individual questions would be considered as “self-centered and a waste of the other students' time” (p. 99). Wang *et al.* reiterated that students from Asian countries were used to receiving instructions and memorizing them. They took in information and gave it back without analysis. They seldom questioned the teachers but were accustomed to complying with authority. Such teaching patterns discouraged students from being independent, creative and critical in their writing, leading to those Asian students’ English literacy problems. While Wang *et al.* did not explicitly

link this to a Confucian heritage (perhaps because of the Confucian heritage of the writers made this implicitly obvious), this clearly was what they were referring to. While Mirshafiei's study (1994) paid more attention to Middle Eastern students due to his own multilingual background and life experience in Middle Eastern countries, Wang *et al.* (2002) and Fu & Townsend (1998) focused more upon cultural influence for Asian learners, especially Chinese students studying abroad. Both studies stated that cultural gaps and differences in education systems led to difficulty for non-native learners in English academic writing. As Wang *et al.* (2002) stated, "Students construct meaning based on their previous learning and experiences, [so] the closer the match between their prior knowledge and the new knowledge, the more accurately they comprehend" (p. 98).

Fu & Townsend (1998) also related the failure of Chinese students in English writing courses abroad to the writing education they received in their home country. However, Fu & Townsend focused more on the communication gaps and misunderstandings arising from the differences in values and standards between Chinese learners and their American teachers. In their case study, the 13 Chinese graduate students in America failed in their writing courses because they didn't realize the different criteria of good writing between Chinese and English speaking countries. The interviews of Chinese students and American instructors created a sad picture: on the one hand, the Chinese students hated their English writing, which they thought sounded uneducated due to their lack of knowledge of classic English literature or quotable English phrases and expressions (p. 130); on the other hand, what Chinese learners thought of as beautiful language in writing would be judged by American teachers as the use of empty clichés or "poor command of standard English" (p. 128). These miscommunications often led to a negative teacher-student relationship and a dilemma in their academic study.

Fu and Townsend also did not explicitly discuss the Aristotelian heritage (or typical training in rhetoric and composition theory) of native English speakers nor the Confucian heritage of the students, yet their case studies fit the pattern perfectly. For instance, notice that the Chinese EFL writers wished they knew more English-language literature when (based on this review of the literature) what they needed more of, in fact, were models of nonfiction academic writing of the sort prized by composition theorists.

So what did these scholars recommend that Chinese EFL students and their teachers in China do?

### **Chapter III: Conclusions and Recommendations**

Before making its own recommendations, this paper will first review what the studies themselves have concluded. In his early study of cultural influence for non-native English learners, Kaplan (1966) insisted that native English teachers must be aware of the cultural differences in thought patterns and help non-native students increase the awareness of these differences. He noted that logic was not culture-bound; yet while he understood the deep philosophy underpinning English academic writing, he did not understand the same thing about the cultures he called “Oriental,” and instead simply gave a descriptive analysis of how their academic writing seemed different, more “circular.”

He did, however, point other scholars in English in the right direction. Since that time many other researchers and scholars have agreed with Kaplan about the importance of cultural awareness and acknowledged cultural awareness as the key factor to solve the problem of why Chinese EFL students might write mechanically proficient academic essays that still were found unacceptable (Fu & Townsend, 1998; Matsuda & Silva, 1999; Wang *et al.*, 2002; Reichelt, 2003). These studies all emphasized that differences could not be viewed as deficits.

Fu & Townsend (1998) pointed out the importance of cultural awareness upon both teachers’ and students’ sides. They suggested that native English teachers at all levels should open their minds and re-educate themselves to be multicultural so that they could distinguish the cultural differences in writing criteria from the incompetence, ignorance, or limited language proficiency of their students. At the same time, since the lack of communication between non-native students and their native English instructors led to unawareness of the different criteria of good

writing and this gap often resulted in academic failure in English writing, native teachers should help non-native students recognize the literacy values, the criteria of good writing, and the standards of logic in American academic culture. While neither in the cases of teachers nor EFL students did the writers offer philosophical guidance about how to do this, their clear purpose was to help non-native students to become bicultural learners and competent writers.

Matsuda & Silva (1999) stressed that heightening students' cultural awareness could promote international and intercultural understanding for both US and international students. Quite similarly, Wang *et al.* (2002) advocated establishing an appreciation of diverse cultures and an understanding in the classroom where differences could not be viewed as deficits, ignorance, or incompetence. Villanueva (1993), a Spanish speaker writing from within U.S. academic culture, described how his academic writing was also faulted for its logic and pointed out how even within western cultures, classical rhetoric diverged into a Spanish-Mediterranean-Arabic style that emphasized flowery and often exaggerated prose and an English one which preferred plain speech, directness and many examples.

Because of academicians like Villanueva, Gale & Gale (1999) argued that composition theorists needed to learn more about the ideologies underlying the academic writing in other cultures. Brennan & Durovic (2005) pointed out that "Confucian heritage" cultures value classical Chinese writing and filial piety and have a totally different idea of what constitutes plagiarism. All of the scholars who discussed Chinese EFL students also pointed at the preference for indirect rather than direct statements.

Non-native students' learning patterns are not fixed but changeable if they get adequate support (Marambe *et al.*, 2012). Some typical practical suggestions about the support that should be provided to L2 students and teachers follow.

Kaplan (1966) provided an approach to TESL teachers of advanced students: the contrastive analysis of rhetoric, which focused on the cultural aspects of logic. He believed that this approach might help foreign students to be consistent with the demands of English speaking world because students could only write well with the mastery of the logic of English. Even though Kaplan's study is centered on TESL, his findings will be also helpful to TEFL teachers.

Fu & Townsend (1998) stated, "Meaning making in school is an interactive process that can transform both teachers and students" (p. 131). They advised native English teachers to clearly state the American criteria and train Chinese students intensively so that those students would feel well prepared to write in English and participate in English writing classroom activities.

By describing the cross-cultural composition course taught at Purdue University, Matsuda & Silva (1999) presented a mediated way to promote effective learning for ESL learners. In this course, ESL learners were required to write weekly journals and five major writing projects. The scholars claimed this course was less threatening yet not less demanding to ESL students, which was essential in the success of ESL writing.

How can Chinese EFL students who wish to study abroad and Chinese teacher of academic writing in English best apply these findings?

### **Recommendations**

As we have seen, since logic is not universal but culture-bound, the criteria for good academic writing is quite different in English and Asian cultures. In American culture, English academic writing as influenced by Plato and Aristotle influences the training of college teachers in rhetoric and composition theory, who thus prefer a linear development with specific examples. The standard for good writing focuses on explicit expression of the idea and a well-organized



structure with linear logic leading to a conclusion that may be very original but which builds upon earlier premises.

In contrast, Chinese Confucian-heritage cultural values emphasize language form and artistic ability more than clarity in expressing ideas and sets no premium on original expression. Following the teachings of Confucianism, the Asian criteria of good writing doesn't emphasize critical thinking but the beauty of words and expressions, and stands almost directly opposite the English preference for plain speaking.

Abundant literature shows that cultural background affects Chinese EFL learners significantly in their English academic writing, usually in an unfriendly way. For those students who pursue further study in America, the differences in values and standards between Chinese learners and their American teachers often result in communication gaps and misunderstandings.

What can Chinese teachers of English do to tackle the problem of the different cultural influences informing academic writing for Chinese students before those students study abroad in English speaking countries? In spite of the ignorance of independent idea and original expressions, most Chinese college English teachers are aware of the difference between linear development of English culture and the circular development of Chinese culture. They think highly of the direct and straightforward expression of ideas with clear examples and illustrations. Coherent development with transitional words or phrases is also regarded as a guarantee of a good writing. Unfortunately, traditional Chinese values are so deeply-rooted in most Chinese students' thought patterns that they often, though unconsciously, leave to the readers the job of making the connections of ideas. In other words, from the perspective of Chinese university English teachers, the literature is informing them of a problem they know all too well. The question is less about how to gain more information to solve the problem, and more about how to

unlearn a pattern that goes very deep, in the same way that a native English speaker, speaking Mandarin as L2, might find it extremely difficult to not be direct. Both Chinese teachers and students do not put much emphasis on development of independent thinking. As Marambe *et al.* stated in 2012, Asian cultural values can be traced back to the influence of Confucianism, which discourages students from questioning authorities or expressing their own thought.

The design of writing practice in college English course caters to the requirement of College English Test Band 4 (CET 4), a well-recognized national English test for undergraduate and graduate students in China since 1987, which requires students to produce a piece of writing with an assigned title or outline within half an hour. Writing beyond the assigned topic or not showing similarity to the writing samples puts a student in danger of failing the test. While to some degree college teachers may know the type of essay that would be preferred in English-speaking countries, they must instead teach students to pass this test.

While the original idea is not the most important factor in the criteria of a good writing in China, the ability to express an idea beautifully is considered as a proof of good education. Recall Wang *et al.*'s (2002) statement: "The purpose of Asian writing is to show the beauty of words and expressions. Asian students consider writing to be like painting. They spend most of their time selecting words and polishing structures rather than speculating, questioning, and exploring ideas (p. 99)." Under these circumstances, memorizing and rehearsing represent the efficient teaching strategies of Chinese teachers of English.

Chinese teachers of English encourage students to read classical works and recite model essays to get high scores in CET 4. Exposed to rote learning, some students are fond of memorizing so called "cool words," which refer to those elaborate and classic expressions, showing they have read numerous classical works and memorized the essentials of them. For

some students this strategy works very well; unfortunately, when they leave China to study abroad, it no longer works.

After reviewing the literature on this topic, it seems clear that what Chinese students who plan to study abroad need is guidance in academic English writing *after* they pass the CET 4 and have the score they need. They must get a good score on the test. Teaching them to drop all allusions to classical writers will not help them at this point. But they and their teachers must understand the culture shift that will happen as soon as they try to write academic essays in native English-speaking countries. Teachers in those countries, especially those who teach many L2 Chinese students, should also be aware of this.

In the study of cultural influence for non-native English learners, many researchers (Kaplan, 1966; Fu & Townsend, 1998; Gale & Gale, 1998; Matsuda & Silva, 1999; Wang et al., 2002; Reichelt, 2003; and many others) acknowledged the importance of the cultural awareness of native English teachers as a tool to help non-native students increase the awareness of these differences. It is safe to draw the conclusion that teachers' strategies of teaching are closely related to students' approaches of learning.

This is true not only in native English teachers but also in Chinese English teachers as well as all other non-native English teachers. To help Chinese learners be well-prepared for future academic writing in the English speaking world, Chinese teachers of English should re-educate themselves to be bicultural first. It is the teachers' responsibility to prevent students from not knowing the criteria of a good writing in academic English. A bicultural teacher can train students for the CET 4 test which students must pass but at the same time can advise students that the type of writing they will do abroad will be different and show them examples. Only an emphasis on both teachers' and students' sides can result in the change of the situation.

In addition to cultural awareness, special training should be designed to provide students with adequate support. Matsuda & Silva (1999) described a cross-cultural composition course as a mediated way to promote effective learning for ESL learners at Purdue University. In this course, ESL learners were required to write weekly journals and five major writing projects. Purdue University's practice can be also applied in China for EFL learners. An elective course about academic writing in English-speaking culture is a possible supplement to traditional college English writing course, which enhances the success of EFL teachers and learners. Students may begin from some easy writing practice, like diary and weekly journals. Besides, teachers may make a list of reading materials for students and require them to practice from basic academic writing, such as paraphrasing, quoting, summarizing, writing reaction/reflection paper and so on. Some basic skills in academic writing are in need, such as organization of the composition, coherence of development and the use of transitional words and phrases, etc. It is quite urgent for students to develop their ability of critical thinking and independent idea. Teachers may push them to argue against authentic theories and create their original expressions.

There is a great need for Chinese teachers of English to recognize the cultural influence on English writing for Chinese learners. It is beneficial for teachers to be aware of the differences between English writing and Chinese writing first, and thus enhance their students' bicultural awareness, which includes different philosophical origins, different thought patterns, different focused features in expressing ideas and different definitions of good reasoning and illustrations between English academic writing and traditional Chinese writing.

At the same time, Chinese teachers and learners should also realize that there is no better way or worse way in criteria of writing. There are only different ways of expressions of our

thoughts. Every choice we make in our writing is related to the culture we live in and is worth our understanding and appreciation.

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