

Investigation of English Writing Difficulties Among Undergraduate English-Majors in Universities in China

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Abstract: English writing proficiency is an important skill for undergraduate students in universities in China. A great deal of researches have been devoted to study the current English writing practices in universities in China. Chinese undergraduate students are reported to have certain difficulties and challenges in writing in English, such as incoherence in English writing, improper use of learned vocabulary, and lack of logical connections and conjunctions among sentences. Most of the studies focus on non-English-majors, but studies on English-majors are quite limited. This study investigates English writing difficulties among undergraduate English-majors in China by employing a literature review of recent related publications. We also invited 30 professional English writing teachers in universities in China to take interviews to explore the difficulties in English writing among undergraduate English-majors. The results show that great difficulties lie in limited choice of vocabulary and sentence types, and incoherent and incohesive structure organization. The findings of this study will help teachers to better understand current English writing practices of undergraduate English-majors in universities in China. Based on the findings of this study, suggestions for teaching strategies are also provided to improve English writing for undergraduate English-majors in China.

Keywords: Chinese Undergraduate English-Majors, English Writing Difficulties, Suggestions

1. Introduction

Proficient writing in English is an important skill for undergraduate English-majors in universities in China. Most of their assignments are in the form of English writing, such as weekly journals, expositive or argumentative papers, graduation thesis, etc. Students are required to clearly express their ideas, provide sufficient evidence to defend their points, and construct pieces of writing coherently and cohesively. Students' written assignments are also considered as a critical criterion to evaluate their academic performance. Since it is widely recognized the importance of English writing proficiency, many universities have provided various writing courses to help students improve their English writing. A great deal of researches have been devoted to study their current English writing practices and it is reported that Chinese students have certain difficulties and challenges in writing in English [1-8]. For example, one of the big difficulties lies in lack of logical connections and conjunctions among sentences [6, 7]. Another difficulty is lack of lexical diversity [8]. Chinese undergraduate students' lexical choices are

restricted to the most common and widely used ones. Besides, undergraduate students are reported to have limited skills for applying their learned vocabulary in proper contexts [9, 10]. However, most of the researches focus on non-English-majors. Studies for English majors are quite limited. This study investigates English writing difficulties among Chinese undergraduate English-majors by employing a literature review of recent publications. We also selected 30 professional English writing teachers in universities in China to take interviews to explore the difficulties. The findings of this study will help teachers to better understand current English writing practices of undergraduate English-majors in universities in China.

2. Method

Our research question is formulated as what are the difficulties that Chinese undergraduate students majoring in English have in English writing in China. We started to search for recent publications guided by this research question. The consulted database was China National Knowledge

Infrastructure (CNKI), an online publishing platform to access the publications in China. The search was limited to the areas of English linguistics and education in higher education, and the source journals were limited to the Chinese Core (CC) and Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI). Master thesis and doctoral dissertations were not included. When searching for articles focusing on the difficulties those Chinese undergraduate students majoring in English have in English writing, we first used the keyword of undergraduate students English writing to get preliminary selection. As articles focusing on English-major students' English writing were quite limited, we used the keyword of Chinese undergraduate students instead. 144 articles were collected guided by this general topic. Then, the articles' titles and abstracts were read carefully and the ones that were related to research, difficulties or problems in Chinese undergraduate students' English writing were downloaded. In further examination, 14 articles were found to involve undergraduate students majoring in English. After reading the selected articles completely, we discovered some problems and difficulties frequently discussed. The following table 1 shows the frequent problems and difficulties.

Table 1. Problems and difficulties discussed in related publications.

Problems/difficulties	Number of articles
Lexical choice	9
Structure organization	7
Syntactic choice	4
Logical problems	4
Writing strategies	3

Then, we interviewed 30 professional English writing teachers in universities in China. We asked them a question "what are the top difficulties and challenges you think Chinese undergraduate English-majors have?" the results from literature reviews, five options of difficulties were provided for the English writing teachers to make a choice. Additional explanation, examples and experience were also required to illustrate the choice.

3. Results and Discussions

Table 2. Problems and difficulties chosen by Chinese professional English writing teachers.

Problems/difficulties	Number of teachers
Lexical choice	18
Syntactic choice	14
Structure organization	11
Logical problem	9
Writing strategies	2

Table 2 shows that the top three difficulties include lexical choice, syntactic choice and structure organization. A number of studies have shown that undergraduate students in China have difficulties in lexical choice. They may have learned a large number of vocabulary, but they are not able to use the learned vocabulary properly in English writing [9]. Lyu claims that undergraduate non English-majors have limited skills for applying their learned vocabulary in proper contexts [10]. It is

also true for undergraduate students majoring in English. In addition to difficulty in proper uses, 18 of the 30 interviewed English teachers have pointed out that English-major students tend to use words general in meaning instead of specific words in their English writing. For instance, students tends to use there-be patterns and the to-be verbs are weak verbs that are general and lack specificity. Another big challenge is to diversify their lexical choices in English writing. For instance, the students had very limited choices of words to describe the condition of being good or bad. Early researches have also demonstrated that Chinese undergraduate students' lexical choices are restricted to the most common and widely used ones [11, 12].

Besides difficulties in lexical choices, Chinese undergraduate students are reported to have difficulties in syntactic choice. Researches demonstrated that Chinese undergraduate students choose to use limited sentence types in their English writing, while it is common for English to have long compound or complex sentences connected by various type of linking devices [13]. 14 of the 30 professional English writing teachers claimed that their students have limited choices of linking words to connect sentences. Students seldom use complex phrases such as noun phrases, past participles and present participles to make concise writing. For instance, one of those teachers recalled that his student once described his bedroom in a way "My dormitory is narrow. However, my dormitory is tidy and cozy. Suitcases are orderly placed beside the cupboard. I have five nice roommates, and we are from six provinces. We are quite different...". Obviously, the student constructed his pieces of writing in English by short and simple sentences without diversifying sentence types.

What's more, English-major students also have difficulties to writing coherently and cohesively. Some studies claim that incoherence and incohesion in students' compositions are resulted from the negative influence of native language [14-17]. We can see that English usually has a topic sentence in each paragraph and the content must be closely relevant to the topic. Every sentence in the paragraph must logically connect with each other. However, the Chinese does not use this cohesive device. Instead of connecting sentences by specific linking words or phrases, the Chinese connects sentences by meaning. We often find in Chinese students' English writing pieces, there are more than one ideas in a single paragraph. Besides, there is omission of logical connections and conjunctions among sentences and chunks [18]. For instance, a professional English writing teacher mentioned that once in writing practice with the theme of the importance of motivation and methods, a student wrote a paragraph as "Secondly, methods provide us scientific guarantee. Sometimes, too much motivation may make people ignore the reality. Methods can give us a correct direction to follow and guide us to use our motivation and energy properly". It is quite hard to figure out what is the topic sentence and what is the logical relationship between these sentences.

4. Suggestions for Teaching Strategies

As we have showed above, Chinese undergraduate students majoring in English also find it hard to show coherence and cohesion in English writing. Besides, many students complained that they may learn a large number of vocabularies and grammatical patterns, but they still write English in a Chinese way. Their native Chinese language has great impact on their English writing [14, 15]. In order to avoid the negative impact, raising awareness of distinctions between English and Chinese is necessary in writing teaching. For instance, these two languages have different thinking ways. An English writer thinks in a liner way as he may put the topic at the very beginning and consistently developing his point of view, while a Chinese writer may mix up more than one idea in a single paragraph and change his view in a spiral way. Another important difference between English and Chinese is that English pays more attention to the dependent or subordinate construction or relationship of clauses with connectives. On the contrary, Chinese has the juxtaposition of clauses with no use of coordinating or subordinating conjunctions. So the Chinese people are not inclined to indicate explicitly the logical relationship between the linguistic components in sentences [19]. To know the differences will help students better understand the importance of switching to a different thinking way in English writing.

In addition, effective writing strategies need to be taught to enhance conciseness and clarity. Undergraduate English-major students also produce problematic pieces of writing due to lack of effective writing strategies. For instance, they may use too much to-be verbs like “there are”, “this is”, “it is” and so on. Overuse of these weak verbs contributes to choppy and wordy sentences. Some useful skills can be taught to help students avoid wordiness. English writing teachers may suggest replacing the to-be verbs with strong, more specific verbs, or combining short, choppy sentence to eliminate to-be verbs. Another big problem is the lack of writing strategies in coherence and cohesion in English writing. Incoherence and incohesion will make it hard to communicate an idea clearly and effectively. Students may also create unclear writing pieces in English due to logical problems such as omission of logical connections among sentences and insufficiency in reasoning and argumentation. To enhance clarity in English writing, coherent and cohesive skills can be provided to follow by the writing teachers. Some key tips are to start a paragraph with a clear and concise topic sentence, focus only on one main idea in a paragraph, provide sufficient evidence, examples or experience to support the main ideas, and use a variety of linking words and phrases and transitional words (but no excessive use of cohesive devices). When a student write an English essay, his primary goal is to express ideas precisely so that the teachers and other evaluators can easily understand his ideas while reading it. Thus, coherence and cohesion is essential for English writing and it is necessary for Chinese students to learn writing strategies in coherence and cohesion.

In most Chinese undergraduate writing classes, teachers

and students put great effort in teaching and learning specific language knowledge and skills, and neglect the importance of learning and practice writing skills and strategies. Zhang suggests that systematic, explicit, and comprehensive instruction on writing knowledge, skills, and strategies may be beneficial [20]. Due to difficulties mentioned above, many Chinese undergraduate students struggle with proper and concise writing, adequate expression of personal views, and efficient argument defending. Instruction on lexical and syntactic choices, structure organization as well as large amount of writing practices could be useful for improving Chinese students writing in English. Thus, much emphasis should be put on skills such as structure organization, proper cohesive devices, logical reasoning and writing for communicative purposes that are also important factors in English writing. Besides, Wei reports that there are limited opportunities for teachers and students to cooperate, interact and share teaching and learning needs, experiences and feelings in English writing classes [5]. A closer teacher-student relationship will be definitely helpful for motivating students to actively engage in writing classes. Thus, interaction, discussion and sharing between teachers and students should be encouraged in English writing classes.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates English writing difficulties among undergraduate English-majors in university in China by reviewing recent related publications. We also invited 30 professional English writing teachers in universities in China to take interviews related to this topic. The results show that big difficulties include lexical choice, syntactic choice and structure organization. Chinese undergraduate English majors are found to have difficulty in proper use of their learned vocabulary and tend to use general and weak words. They also have limited choice of sentence types in English writing. Besides, English-major students have great difficulties in writing coherently and cohesively. To cope with these difficulties, suggestions are made for teachers to improve students' English writing, such as raising awareness of distinctions between English and Chinese, teaching effective writing strategies to enhance conciseness and clarity, and giving more instruction on structure organization, proper use of cohesive devices and logical reasoning.

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