

# The comparison between freshmen and sophomores' EFL writing of Chinese students from the perspective of pragmatic failures

Dan He

China West Normal University

No. 1, Shida Rd, Nanchong, Sichuan Province,

China

## Abstract

*This thesis is intended to probe into improve Chinese college students' English writing from the perspective of pragmatic failure. There is an experimental study with a questionnaire is analyzed to infer the students' opinions and habits in English writing and culture learning and teaching. All the data and results of the research are analyzed to infer the causes of pragmatic failures in students' English writing. The comparison and analysis between the two grades may show us to what extent these students improved and changed in their English writing in the two years*

**Key words:** writing, cultural difference, pragmatic failure

## 1. Pragmatic Failure and L2 Writing

Culture is a vast topic. It is multidimensional and complicated and definitions of culture range from all-encompassing ones to narrow ones. "Culture consists of all the shared products of human society" (Robertson, 1981). Chinese culture and cultures of English speaking countries are widely different branches of language. Those differences between two languages and cultures frequently lead to Chinglish, which refers to expressing in English words but in Chinese way. So, in order to improve students' writing, teachers have to take the cultural dimensions of transfer in relation to writing into consideration, and regard writing as a cultural activity

There are diverse definitions of pragmatics and simply speaking it is the study of language usage. Pragmatic failure is first proposed by Jenny Tomas (1983: 91) to refer to the inability to understand what is meant by what is said. It includes the language and behavior that is inappropriate to most native speakers. Because the inappropriateness caused by cultural difference would create ill feeling between native speakers and Chinese learners of English, they are often worse than linguistic mistakes.

Purves and Hawisher inferred that "good writing" is a "culturally defined phenomenon" and that "written tests, and the ways in which they are used and perceived, vary according to the cultural group to which an individual belongs" (1990, 183). Writing is a cultural activity. Differences were found in the writing style,

content and pragmatics of the writings across cultures. Thus, pragmatic failures certainly occur in L2 writing, and they are more difficult to identify because of establishing which cultural norms should serve as the point of the reference. In order to express appropriately in L2 writing, pragmatic failure need to be noticed and in this way more effective expression achieved and writing ability be well developed.

Writing is an instrument of communication, so the L2 writing, such as Chinese students' English writing, is and intercultural communication. As Chen Shen mentions, the paradigm of intercultural communication in ELT comes much later than those of explicit cultural studies and communicative language teaching. By putting together certain ideas about communication, culture, society, education and human, a different way of looking at teaching and learning about interaction among cultures has emerged. So we can develop Chinese students' English writing from the pragmatic failure in ELT, tightly based on communicative purpose.

## **2. The Purpose of the Present Research and Design**

In order to observe the present situation of college students' pragmatic competence in L2 writing and the causes of the pragmatic failure occur in their writing, author conducted an investigation on their opinions on writing and culture, which will make us more aware of the importance of sensitivity to cross-cultural pragmatic failure in the English writing and the urgency of enhancing culture teaching.

Nowadays, the purpose of learning English is to use it appropriately, especially in communication. Writing is also an instrument of communication, and its main purpose is to communicate. As mentioned in previous part, writing has always been the problematic part for college students and difficult for their teachers to help. This research will aim at finding the inadequacy of the traditional approach to college English writing course and students' awareness of cross-cultural aspects in English writing by analysis of students' viewpoints in their former and present English writing learning and teaching,

The present study will work over all kinds of pragmatic failures among the college students' English writing and collect their attitudes toward the English writing to find some approaches to improve their writing successfully. In this research, the questionnaire was used. The subjects for the survey in this thesis are 202 university students of non-English majors studying in China-west Normal University. They were divided into two groups for research. Group 1: 110 freshmen, and group 2: 92 sophomores. The instruments involved a questionnaire designed by researcher herself. It consisted of 20 items which asked the students about their awareness of cross-cultural aspects in writing and opinions on English writing learning and teaching. The questionnaire was conducted in normal class time. Before the students start with the questionnaire, it was made clear to them that it is not a test and it would be used only for research purpose. They had to do the test individually and the papers were gathered immediately after they finished.

All the data of questionnaire are inputted correspondingly for each participant firstly. And Chi-Square

Test and the Percentage Analysis for each choice are conducted to analyze the students’ opinions and habits on English writing and check if there is any difference for each item choice among different research groups. In this way, the author continues to analyze the factors causing pragmatic failure in students’ English writing. In the whole process, the statistic system SPSS is used.

### 3. Data analysis and discussions

In this part, the collected data are analyzed by different statistical methods and the results of the investigation in relation to the research questions are reported here. And the discussions will also be presented along with the reporting of the results. The comparison and analysis of some items choice between the two grades may show us to what extent these students improved and changed in their English writing in the two years. The analysis and discussion are based on table 1.

Table 1: The comparison of item choice between freshmen and sophomore

item	freshmen					sophomore					$\chi^2$ value		
	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E			
1	n	34	50	26	0	0	n	28	46	15	3	0	5.135
	percent	30.9	45.5	23.6	0	0	Percent	30.4	50.0	16.3	3.3	0	
2	n	47	28	29	6	—	N	34	31	25	2	—	2.955
	percent	42.7	25.5	26.4	5.5	—	Percent	37.0	33.7	27.2	2.2	—	
3	n	5	43	51	11	0	n	4	62	22	4	0	16.866**
	percent	4.5	39.1	46.4	10.0	0	percent	4.3	67.4	23.9	4.3	0	
4	n	65	41	3	1	0	n	37	45	0	9	1	16.802**
	percent	59.1	37.3	2.7	0.9	0	percent	40.2	48.9	0	9.8	1.1	
5	n	60	13	28	8	1	n	29	22	37	4	0	15.208**
	percent	54.5	11.8	25.5	7.3	0.9	percent	31.5	23.9	40.2	4.3	0	
6	n	3	16	10	50	31	n	4	19	10	41	18	3.160
	percent	2.7	14.5	9.1	45.5	28.2	percent	4.3	20.7	10.9	44.6	19.6	
7	n	24	70	1	15	—	n	26	45	1	20	—	4.662
	percent	21.8	63.6	0.9	13.6	—	percent	28.3	48.9	1.1	21.7	—	
8	n	51	46	11	2	0	n	38	46	6	2	0	1.780
	percent	46.4	41.8	10.0	1.8	0	percent	41.3	50.0	6.5	2.2	0	
9	n	21	44	20	25	—	n	24	19	31	18	—	12.125**
	percent	19.1	40.0	18.2	22.7	—	percent	26.1	20.7	33.7	19.6	—	
10	n	36	68	2	4	—	n	41	37	13	1	—	17.882**
	percent	32.7	61.8	1.8	3.6	—	percent	44.6	40.2	14.1	1.1	—	

  

item	freshmen					sophomore					$\chi^2$ value		
	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E			
11	n	5	54	49	2	—	n	12	44	35	1	—	5.005
	percent	4.5	49.1	44.5	1.8	—	percent	13.0	47.8	38.0	1.1	—	
12	n	8	26	76	—	—	n	7	23	62	—	—	0.067
	percent	7.3	23.6	69.1	—	—	percent	7.6	25.0	67.4	—	—	
13	n	67	27	13	3	0	n	44	30	17	1	0	4.892
	percent	60.9	24.5	11.8	2.7	0	percent	47.8	32.6	18.5	1.1	0	
14	n	27	52	24	5	2	n	30	39	21	2	0	3.928
	percent	24.5	47.3	21.8	4.5	1.8	percent	32.6	42.4	22.8	2.2	0	
15	n	10	23	37	35	5	n	7	39	33	11	2	17.227**
	percent	9.1	20.9	33.6	31.8	4.5	percent	7.6	42.4	35.9	12.0	2.2	
16	n	15	43	36	16	0	n	12	37	29	14	0	0.067
	percent	13.6	39.1	32.7	14.5	0	percent	13.0	40.2	31.5	15.2	0	
17	n	23	16	52	19	—	n	12	13	62	5	—	12.500**
	percent	20.9	14.5	47.3	17.3	—	percent	13.0	14.1	67.4	5.4	—	
18	n	26	62	18	4	0	n	17	43	27	4	1	6.570
	percent	23.6	56.4	16.4	3.6	0	percent	18.5	46.7	29.3	4.3	1.1	
19	n	4	10	25	59	12	n	3	8	19	49	13	0.550
	percent	3.6	9.1	22.7	53.6	10.9	percent	3.3	8.7	20.7	53.3	14.1	
20	n	3	13	74	17	3	n	1	13	69	7	2	3.969
	percent	2.7	11.8	67.3	15.5	2.7	percent	1.1	14.1	75.0	7.6	2.2	

\*: P<0.05

\*\* : P<0.01

#### 3.1. The analysis and comparison of items about teachers’ teaching in students’ view

Pragmatic failure in students’ English writing is mainly caused by the lack of culture knowledge of target language, and the lack of culture knowledge may caused by various reasons. There are some items in the questionnaire are about the teachers’ culture teaching from students’ view. Item 2 is about the medium from which the students get the culture knowledge.

*Item 2: Which of the following is the main medium from which you get the cultural differences among different nations?*

- A. teachers’ introduction in class
- B. English magazines
- C. English movies and videos
- D. contact English native speakers

According to  $\chi^2$  —test, the difference of this item is not significant ( $\chi^2_{(3)}=2.955, P>0.05$ ). There are 42.7% of freshmen and 37.0% of sophomores choosing A, and less students choosing the other three choices in both grades. It shows that a lot of students depend on teachers’ introduction in class to get the culture knowledge. Therefore, the teachers’ culture teaching in class related to the extent to which students’ grasp the culture knowledge directly.

The item 3 and 5 are about teachers' culture teaching and what they value in English writing teaching. Seen from the table, the significant level in both item 3 and 5 is less than 0.05 ( $P < 0.05$ ), which means the differences of students' ideas about these items are significant. The two items are about the culture teaching in English class. Item 3 in questionnaire:

*How your teacher does often introduces related cultural background in class?*

A) *much often*    B) *often*    C) *less often*    D) *seldom*    E) *never*

There are only 43.6% of freshmen choosing A or B, while 71.7% of sophomores choosing them. It shows that teachers pay less attention to culture teaching on freshmen than sophomores. Then item 5 is about what teacher value most in teaching and assessing English writing:

*What your teacher valued most in English writing teaching and assessing?*

A) *vocabulary and sentence structure*    B) *coherence*  
C) *proper arrangement*    D) *culture introduction*

There are 54.5% of freshmen think that their teacher value the vocabulary and sentence structure most, and only 8% of them choosing D. Although there are 31.5% of sophomores choosing A and 40.2% of them choosing C, there are still 4.3% of them choosing D. We can see that although teachers often introduce cultural background in class, they seldom related it to English writing. Based on students' choices, it can be inferred that most of teachers usually do not value culture introduction in English writing course and pay little attention on it. Teachers pay much attention on the vocabulary and sentence structure and proper arrangement in two grades respectively.

### 3.2 The comparison and analysis of items about students' view on English writing

The item 1 in the questionnaire is to test students' awareness of cultural difference:

*Do you think there is difference in culture and customs among nations of different languages?*

A) *much*    B) *many*    C) *not too much*    D) *little*    E) *no*

According to  $\chi^2$ —test, there is not significant differences of students' ideas about this item ( $\chi^2_{(3)} = 5.135$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ). All the freshmen agree that there is cultural difference among different nations, and 76.4% of them choosing A or B. At same, there are also 80.4% of sophomores choosing A or B, and there is nobody choosing E in both grades. It shows almost all the students admit and aware of the cross-cultural difference among nations of different languages.

The item 16 and 18 in the questionnaire are to students' awareness of cultural difference and the importance of culture teaching in English writing.

*Item 16: You think the influence of cross-cultural difference on English writing is:*

A. *much great*    B. *great*    C. *a little*    D. *little*    E. *not exist*

*Item 18: You think the culture teaching in English writing class is:*

A. *much important*    B. *important*    C. *less important*    D. *not so important*    E. *not important*

According to  $\chi^2$ —test, the differences in the two items are not significant ( $\chi^2_{(3)} = 0.067$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ;

$\chi^2_{(3)}=6.570$ ,  $P>0.05$ ). In item 16, there are 85.5% of freshmen and 84.8% of sophomores choosing A, B or C, which agree that the cultural differences have influence on English writing to some degree. In item 18, there are 96.4% of freshmen and 94.6% of sophomores choosing A, B or C, which admit that the culture teaching is important in English writing course to some extent. And there is nobody choosing E in both grades. It shows that almost all the students in both grades are aware of the existence and importance of cross-cultural aspects in English writing.

The students' writing habits may be influenced by their opinions, and there are some items are about students' habits in practical writing. The item 9, 10 and 11 in the questionnaire are to get what the students think of most and what are the most difficult part in their practical process of writing.

*Item 9: Which of the following is the most difficult for you in English writing?*

A. vocabulary    B. grammar    C. essay arrangement    D. cultural difference

*Item 10: Which of the following you think of most in English writing?*

A. main content    B. vocabulary and grammar    C. essay arrangement    D. cultural difference

*Item 11: Which of the following is your key point when you check your writing?*

A. spelling    B. sentence structure    C. coherence    D. pragmatic failure

According to  $\chi^2$ —test, there is significant difference in item 9 ( $\chi^2_{(3)}=12.125$ ,  $P<0.05$ ). The main difference is that there more freshmen (40%) than sophomores (20.7%) choosing B, and there are less freshmen (18.2%) than sophomores (33.7%) choosing C. The difference of students' ideas about item 10 is also greatly significant ( $\chi^2_{(3)}=17.882$ ,  $P<0.01$ ). The major difference is that there are more than half freshmen (61.8%) choosing B, while there are less sophomores (40.2%) choosing B. From the two items above, we can find that freshmen put more emphasis on vocabulary and grammar while sophomores swift their emphasis to the arrangement in writing. In item 11, the difference is not significant. There are 93.6% of freshmen and 85.8% of sophomores choosing B and C, which infers that most of them valued the sentence structure and coherence most when checking their writing. In the three items above, despite the differences of students' choice, there is similarity between two grades. There are fewer students choosing D than the other three choices in the three items. There are 22.7% of freshmen and 19.6% of sophomores choosing D in item 9, 3.6% of freshmen and 1.1% of sophomores choosing D in item 10 and 1.8% of freshmen and 1.1% of sophomores choosing D in item 11. It show that although most of the students are aware of the cultural differences among different nations, as inferred by item 1, there are few of them valued the cultural mismatch and pragmatic failures in their English writing.

Students' writing habits would certainly influence their compositions. Item 12 is to get their writing habits in the process of English:

*When you are wiring English essay, you usually:*

A. write in Chinese firstly and then translate it into English

B. think of it in English directly and then write in English

C. think of it in Chinese firstly and then write in English

The difference of the item between two grades is not significant. There are 69.1% of freshmen and

67.4% of sophomores choosing C. As the cultural thought pattern has marked influence upon L2 writing, their process of thinking and plan have impact on their English writing.

The item 19 and 20 are about their ideas of how to improve English writing competence.

*Item 19: You think "improve your English writing competence" is:*

A. much easy    B. easy    C. not so easy    D. difficult    E. much difficult

*Item 20: Do you know how to improve your English writing competence?*

A. quite clear    B. clear    C. a little    D. little    E. don't know

The differences of the both items are not significant ( $\chi^2_{(3)}=0.550$ ,  $P>0.05$ ;  $\chi^2_{(3)}=3.969$ ,  $P>0.05$ ). In item 19, there are 53.6% of freshmen and 53.3% of sophomores choosing D, and 12.7% of freshmen and 12.1% of sophomores choosing A and B. In item 20, there are only 14.5% of freshmen and 15.2% of sophomores choosing A and B. It shows that most of them don't clear how to improve their English writing yet and think it difficult to improve it even after more than one year's English learning in college. We can find what aspect the students wish to improve mostly from item 17:

*You wish to improve your English writing in the aspect of:*

A. proper use of spelling and grammar    B. proper use of vocabulary

C. proper arrangement and coherence    D. understanding related cultural knowledge

The difference of this item is greatly significant ( $\chi^2_{(3)}=12.500$ ,  $P<0.01$ ). The main difference of the two groups is that there are 67.4% of sophomores choosing C while only 47.3% of freshmen choosing it; and there are 20.9% of freshmen choosing A while only 13.0% of sophomores choosing it. It shows that there more freshmen valuing the spelling and grammar than sophomores and less freshmen valuing the arrangement and coherence than sophomores. There are only 17.5% and 5.4% of two groups respectively choosing D. This result is similar to the choice of item 5, which is about what the teacher value most in English writing teaching and assessing. Therefore, what the teacher value in the teaching certainly influence students' learning. With little cultural introduction in English writing class, there are fewer students value the hinder of cultural differences in English writing.

#### 4. Conclusion

According to the comparison and analysis of the different item choice of the two grades, the author deduces that there is no significant improve in their English writing after more than one year's English learning in university, especially from the cultural aspects, which would cause the pragmatic failures. The major difference of the two grades' students is that most of them change their emphasis on English writing from the vocabulary and grammar to proper arrangement and coherence. These changes are related to teachers' change of emphasis on English writing teaching to some degree. However, most of them think it difficult to improve their English writing competence and are not clear about how to improve it. From the results of the questionnaire, author deduces that teachers' English writing teaching have influence on students' opinions on English writing and their writing habits. In the English writing



process of students, what they value most and regard the most difficult are consistent with the teachers' emphasis in English writing classes.

Firstly, in general the students' pragmatic competence in English writing is not adequately developed. Secondly, there is also somewhat correlation between their opinions on English writing, such as their awareness of the cultural difference and its influence on English writing, and their pragmatic competence in English writing. It seemed that in order to promote the students' pragmatic competence in English writing, it is necessary to raise their cultural awareness. Thirdly, teachers' emphasis on English writing class would influence students' opinions and practical writing habits. And students' comparatively low level of pragmatic competence in English writing is mainly because of their insufficient or vague understanding and recognition of the target culture. Therefore, enhancing culture teaching and put more emphasis on pragmatic failure in English writing class is of great importance.

In all, the pragmatic failures in Chinese students' English writing are always caused by several factors. And these factors are only the central ones as a complicated intertexture but not the all. In order to improve and upgrade students' pragmatic competence in English writing, attention to these factors is needed.

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