

An Examination of EFL Written Discourse Development

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Abstract

This paper mainly studies EFL written discourse development--an aid for English paragraph or essay writing, focusing on the pragmatic failure. The writers approach the issue in a way of identifying the major problems shown in EFL English writings in a paragraph level through a survey. Some underlying reasons in linguistic, cognitive, cultural aspects are discussed in order to find an effective approach to EFL teaching in terms of EFL English written discourse development. One way to achieve this is to apply contrastive rhetoric (CR) to EFL research in regard to teaching and learning paragraph development. CR can be taken as a pedagogical solution to the problems of the subsequent development and open up new possibilities for the consideration of EFL writing learning and instruction. The authors hope to find an insight related to pedagogy by this contrastive study.

An Examination of EFL Written Discourse Development

English writing relates not only to linguistic competences, such as syntax and grammar, but also to socio-pragmatic competence of proper and effective use of the target language (Thomas 1984). Paragraph development, as a process of writing and combination of those competences, is a difficult and often neglected part for both Chinese EFL teachers and students. A look at the model essays used by some writing books and by some teachers in class show problems in presenting in English paragraph development. Kaplan (1966) once states the writer's ideas are expressed not only by the meanings of words and sentences, but also by development of ideas through proper arrangement of sentences and even paragraphs. As paragraph development is different from language to language, taking different logical, rhetorical or discourse patterns, it demands great attention from EFL teachers and researchers, for it helps to guarantee an effective communication.

Culture sensitive, the writers of the paper notice that EFL Chinese students cannot present themselves clearly either in oral presentation or in a written one, with their paragraphs or essays being poorly developed. It is definitely a cultural trait of L1 development patterns left on the target language. Some of English paragraphs chosen both from CET writing books and classroom workshop to be elaborated further are of typical Chinese styles--indirectness in several ways. Realizing the seriousness of the problem, the writers conducted a survey to see if Chinese EFL student writers are trained that way by requiring them to make an assessment of some of problematic English paragraphs elaborated by the EFL teachers and from writing books. The results show direct influence of teachers and writing books in a way of negative transfer, of which obvious cultural trait is found in the students' assessment of the given

paragraphs. The writers of this paper therefore attempt to discuss the failure of EFL learners and teachers with paragraph development and explore the reasons behind the failure.

Survey

This empirical research of writing emphasizes the influence of Chinese culture on EFL student writers in terms of the discourse development patterns employed commonly by EFL Chinese writers. By using CR (Contrastive Rhetoric) approach, the research tries to examine the pragmatic failure stemming from L1 Chinese culture and language transfer onto L2 target language in English paragraph development. The purposes of the research are as follows: (1) to identify discourse or rhetorical patterns used by EFL Chinese writers or problems that lead to the failure *through* the observable phenomenon, (2) to explain the possible reasons or factors that have caused the failure of EFL Chinese writers' written discourse development, and (3) to show the pedagogical significance and the value of the research in terms of paragraph development

Hypothesis

To achieve the above purposes, the writers raise the following four hypotheses: (1) the development patterns used by the NS (Native English speakers) are different from the patterns used by CS (Chinese speakers); (2) Chinese EFL writers including some EFL teachers follow certain shared discourse or rhetorical patterns in their writing practices; (3) EFL writers turn to L1 (Chinese) transfer when they develop English paragraphs through some commonly used rhetorical patterns; (4) the way EFL Chinese English teachers taught has some negative influence on L2 writers.

Subject

The subjects consist of five groups of 105 non-English major students from different departments of Harbin Institute of Technology. The respondents are of different ages from 18 to 39, belonging to different English levels, with two groups being non-English major undergraduates, the other three being non-English major PhD candidates. The reason why this university is chosen is that the university as one of the top ten in China shows to a certain degree a high level in English teaching. The study built of different groups is designed to allow for reliable comparison. The undergraduate student groups and PhD candidate groups are chosen for two purposes: one is to obtain data for testing the Chinese preference for paragraph development, and the other purpose is to see whether the EFL teaching affects Chinese EFL writers' assessment of the given paragraphs and if we can find some important data concerning the paragraph development.

Methodology

In this study, the writers compare the assessment of given English paragraphs (Chinese-style) by an American English teacher with that by Chinese EFL students. The investigation uses three English expository paragraphs of Chinese style (fig. 1) written by Chinese EFL writers, one of which is published in a written English book (1997, 1998) and also used as a model in class for EFL students to follow (2005). The second model paragraph is cited by Cai Jigang (2003) as model for contrast and the last English paragraph used is written by a Chinese student which bears a great similarity to the model letter used in English for New Scientists, an English writing book for PhD candidates. The reason why the

expository paragraphs are used as a genre for the research is that this type is the most commonly used type in the writing of assignment and the examination, and that paragraph is usually taken as basic as well as the most important part for idea development. Another tool used for this research is a 10 sentence-questionnaire. The investigation is designed to elicit the assessment of Chinese EFL writers for those three model paragraphs and the influence of the EFL teachers on the target language.

Figure 1 Three models

Three model paragraphs used in the study

1. Electricity has been playing an important role ever since its discovery. Before the discovery people had been living in the darkness, without modern electric light, radio, washing machines, videos and computer. Now, we are enjoying everything the world could offer. It is electricity that drives away the darkness, and modernizes our industry.
2. Taking part in sports also helps improve study efficiency. It can give you a rest after a day's hard work. It can make you relax when you are tired and broken-down. It can relieve the pressure you have in studies. If you take part in sports regularly, your study efficiency will surely be improved.
3. I major in communication engineering in Harbin Institute of technology. During four years of study there, I learned a lot from and became more mature. Now, I have finished the school learning there. During the long but comparatively short four years, I believed one famous old saying that one needs to sharpen his tools if he wants to complete his job. In my school years of Harbin Institute of Technology, I worked hard and studied diligently, holding an old belief that God will help those who are diligent.

Ratings of model 1 of the undergraduates

52 respondents	Undergraduates class 1	Undergraduates class 2	Percentage
Well-developed (26)	16	10	50%
Acceptable (23)	13	10	44%
Poorly-developed (3)	11	2	5.7%
			100%

Rating of model 2 of the undergraduates

52 respondents	Undergraduates class 1	Undergraduates class 2	Percentage
Well-developed (25)	17	8	48%
Acceptable (22)	12	10	42.3%
Poorly-developed (6)	2	4	9.7%
			100%

Rating of model 3 of the undergraduates

52 respondents	Undergraduates class 1	Undergraduates class 2	Percentage
Well-developed (18)	12	6	34.6%
Acceptable (25)	19	6	48%
Poorly-developed (11)	1	10	16.1%
			100%

Rating of model 1 of PhD. Candidates

53 respondents	Class 11 (15)	Class 9 (18)	Class 3 (20)	Percentage
Well-developed (17)	6	6	5	32.7%
Acceptable (26)	7	6	13	50%
Poorly-developed (9)	3	4	2	17.3%
				100%

Rating of model 2 of PhD candidates

53 respondents	Class 11 (15)	Class 9 (18)	Class 3 (20)	Percentage
Well-developed (17)	5	6	6	32.7%
Acceptable (21)	5	9	7	40%
Poorly-developed 14	6	1	7	27%
				100%

Rating of model 3 of PhD candidates

53 respondents	Class 11 (15)	Class 9 (18)	Class 3 (20)	Percentage
Well-developed (8)	2	2	4	15%
Acceptable (9)	5	3	2	17.3%
Poorly-developed (35)	9	12	14	67%
				100%

Findings

The major findings of the research into the failure of paragraph development are that the EFL Chinese writers and an American teacher show different preference for the given paragraphs, and that compared with American development style, the Chinese development style, much influenced by the Chinese rhetoric or discourse patterns, are very indirect in the expository paragraphs. For the first given paragraph, 50% of the undergraduate students regard it as a well-developed paragraph, 44% regard it as acceptable, 5.75% rate it as poorly-developed; while 32.7% of PhD candidates rate it as well-developed, 50% rate it as acceptable, and 17.3% regard it as poorly-developed. The data indicates that a great majority of the students show the preference for the paragraph development of the given paragraph, only 11.5% not.

For the second given paragraph, 48% of the undergraduate students regard it as a well-developed paragraph, 42.3% regard it as acceptable, 9.7% rate it as poorly-developed; while 32.7% PhD candidates rate it as well-developed, 40% rate it as acceptable, and 27% regard it as poorly-developed. Although the number for the preference drops a little bit, it seems that 40% PhD candidates like the way it develops and another 33% accept the way.

For the last given paragraph, 34.6% of the undergraduates regard it as a well-developed paragraph, 48% regard it as acceptable, 16.1% rate it as poorly-developed; while 15% PhD candidates rate it as well-developed, 17.3% rate it as acceptable, and 67% regard it as poorly-developed. Among those who regard it as a problematic paragraph, PhD candidates have sharp eye for the paragraph, but most of them fail to find the reason for the failure.

Another finding worth looking at is the result of questionnaires. When asked when they start to learn English writing, 75% of the undergraduates admit they learn writing in high school, 53% of them learn it in senior high. However, among the PhD candidates who start to learn English writing, 56% admit they learn it in universities. This sharp difference shows

although the teaching of English writing starts early, there seems to be no clear indication that undergraduates are better than PhD candidates in terms of assessment.

One more data comparison is also worthy of notice. For the question whether they have been taught about organization patterns of an English paragraph, over 80% of undergraduates say YES. For the question about the development patterns of an English paragraph, also over 80% undergraduates say YES. However, for the question whether they have been taught about the learning of paragraph organization 55.8% of PhD candidates say NO, and for learning of paragraph development, over 70% of PhD candidates say NO. But the data of assessment indicates that a majority of the undergraduates and most of the PhD candidates have made the similar choice, in terms of the first model and the second model. Why does this happen? When we see the given paragraph cited as a positive model by the EFL teachers (Fig. 1), we'll have a clear picture. Considering this data, however, the data of the assessment of the both groups clearly demonstrate their ignorance of the cultural differences in terms of development, and their failure of the assessment are due to their preference for Chinese discourse patterns of indirectness, although most of them have learned English writing several years.

The following questions also help to explain the phenomenon. When asked about correction of the assignment, 65.4% of undergraduates admit that EFL teachers only correct the grammatical errors, with only 0.96% admitting the correction of logic mistakes, although 25% admit the correction of both categories. It clearly indicates that logic helps much more greatly with contextual meaning and is more important than grammar in effective communication, particularly in cross cultural communication; however, it is unfortunately neglected in English writing class, especially in grading work.

Discussion

Identifying the Problems of Inappropriate Development

Then what are the problems with the paragraphs? The first major problem with the development is indirectness by brief review of history *before and now* right after the topic sentence. Deng Yanchang (1989) says development in a more logical way is the target. Kaplan (1966) suggests one needs to learn the logic if he wants to master the language. Although the review of history right after the topic sentence is the right logical development of a Chinese paragraph, the use of it in the English paragraph and right after the topic sentence is actually in violation of logic for most native English speakers. This review pattern used is to a great extent due to Chinese EFL ignorance of differences in logical patterns. The following underdeveloped and poorly developed paragraph given by some EFL English teachers as a model used in 2005 is a good example to illustrate the problem.

Women in the Modern World

Women are playing an increasingly important part in society today. Long ago, women only did something in the kitchen or at home. Now many of them have serious jobs to serve for people. What men can do so can women?

The second major problem with indirectness is the parallel structure used. Several model essays from a book edited by Li Funing in *A New Dictionary of Model English Compositions* (1997) reveal this problem. In that book, parallel structures like it can..., it can..., it can..., or without it...; without it..., without it...; it should..., it should..., it should... are encouraged in English paragraph writing. We can see from examples above and

the assessment rate of the given paragraphs that both EFL Chinese teachers and Chinese EFL writers prefer parallel structure. Conner (2000) has pointed out that Chinese students tend to resort to rhetorical devices to reveal the intention of the writer.

The third major problem with indirectness is developing with subjectivity. In terms of development, there exists one big difference between Chinese and English, that is, the different reasoning. Experts on Chinese writing have observed that Chinese writers are more subjective than Americans in supporting their views. Carlson (1988) conducted a series of studies on the cultural differences in reasoning skills. She claimed that EFL Chinese students were more vague in reasoning than NS. She commented that the essays of Chinese L2 writers tend to be scored significantly lower than those of NS (native speaker) because they are more subjective, with less credibility, and their essays are empty with less evidence or facts. In the sample paragraph by an EFL writer mentioned above, the writer continues his letter of application with the following statement when presenting his qualifications in a paragraph *“I believed one famous old saying that one needs to sharpen his tools if he wants to complete his job. In my school years of Harbin Institute of Technology, I worked hard and studied diligently, holding an old belief that God will help those who are diligent.”* And the similar development strategy of turning to the famous saying in a letter is also used in the writing book for 2005 PhD students. What’s worse is that some of the EFL teachers encourage their students to memorize them and learn to use them in writing the application letter, for in Chinese culture, famous saying and the knowledge about politics and economic situation are valued. And this reflects the way of Chinese thinking which is quite different from American strong sense of objectivity (Hinkel, 2001). As Kinson (1991) points out that (cited by Eli Hinkel) the notion of scientific objectivity can be partially reflected in how the author approaches and develops a topic and that the rhetorical features must be associated with objectivity, letting fact speak for itself. This objectivity requires linearity--directness.

Identifying the Factors for Sociopragmatic Failure

The different cultural background explains why EFL writers failed to give right assessment of paragraph development. This pragmatic failure may arise from one of identifiable sources--sociopragmatic transfer (the inappropriate transfer of writing strategies from mother tongue to the target language). Thomas (1984) indicates that inappropriate transfer of writing strategies from L1 and L2 is the frequent cause of pragmalinguistic failure (L1 pragmatic competence influences L2 pragmatic knowledge). The failure from the negative transfer at discourse level hinders the writer of L1 from the right or appropriate arrangement of ideas of L2 to the target language. In fact, the frequent occurrence of negative transfer by EFL writers and the ignorance of negative transfer in terms of paragraph development will be hindrances to effective communication between the EFL writers and their English readers. Therefore, the writers of the target language need to have the knowledge of the differences, because negative transfer at the discourse level is covert and less easy for the students to discover and for the English instructors to identify compared with the lexical transfer and syntactical transfer. In fact, those three paragraphs show that Chinese EFL writers’ sociopragmatic transfer mainly stems from an indirect or circular development of Chinese language.

Another factor is the cognitive one. To understand the failure of the students being unable to identify the problems with paragraph development, cognitive activity of developing their written discourse competence in terms of internalized common experiences is to be

studied, for understanding of the internal cognitive approach to the study of human activity relating to cognitive processes helps researcher or instructors explore EFL students' assumptions about their own learning process and helps EFL learners to be aware of the cognitive implications of their choices of using the preferred or appropriate development patterns. (Rorty & Geertz, 1999)

According to Rorty and Geertz (1999), it was not until recently that cognitive study could account for the mind at academic work, and writing was no exception. They go on to say that writing is one of the most common, observable results of cognizing. According to the recent coupling of cognitive psychology and social psychology, the writing ability, training, and social imperatives do not render the psychology of writing completely. Some experts argue the relationship between cognitive psychology and social psychology in describing the major influences of thought and emotion on writing can be acknowledged. Now, even though it is hard for the present writers to distinguish the causal relationship between them, we are sure to say cognitive factors are powerful determiners of both teaching and learning, including language learning.

Another consideration regarding cognition is a shift in the way to link the learners and environment. Normally, when a person is "in" an environment, the activities of the person and environment are viewed as parts of a mutually constructed whole. In China, students are taught or trained to use parallel structure to reinforce or support the ideas when emphasizing their points. One observation the writers have made from the investigation is to link these cognitive factors of the preference for rhetorical device like parallelism and famous sayings, and review of history in the writing with EFL learners and teaching activity in China, for the thinking patterns and development patterns are learned in Chinese learning environment, and actions are allowed in Chinese learning environment. However, when using a different language demanded in another environment, Chinese patterns are not to be encouraged. The use of famous sayings, idioms or phrases, and rhetorical device to create new combinations of ideas is not appropriate, as transfer takes place, for in a cognitive context, they act as transfer instrument. From the cognitive perspective, rhetorical devices like the parallelism and sayings have been unconsciously used in English discourse by Chinese EFL learners as the strategies for the paragraph development. For cognitive view, sayings and rhetorical devices like parallelism, and review of history are not just semantic extensions, but also the connections and relations with specific learning environment. Bateson (1972) says "individual" and "society" are not separately described things, insofar as social activity is concerned. According to him, one cannot describe individual "learning" separately from environment.

The last factor in terms of failure is cultural interference. We can find interferences displayed by the EFL students in their assessment. In referring to topic shown in the first paragraph about the role of electricity, history review is made before getting to the point. Why do the most of the students, either undergraduates or PhD candidates prefer this pattern? Besides the cognitive factor, there is a human factor. That is, teachers, especially Chinese English teachers train them that way and fail to expose the difference to EFL learners. Cultural value can be another factor that hinders the EFL writers. In a culture of collectivism like China, according to Jia (1997), individual opinion is not important in regard to the group harmony, as shown in the first model essay. And this indirect development is a good indication of Chinese group culture, in which a Chinese finds it a virtue to conform to the group he belongs to, viewing the individual as an integrated part of the group, since one who disturbs the group consensus may have to take risk of being excluded from the group.

In referring to the second difference, Chinese prefer parallelism much more than native English speakers when they develop a paragraph to reinforce an idea presented. Language reflects thoughts and people's worldview. According to Jia (1997), Chinese people have this preference owing to the possible fact that they are good at image thinking and prefer using rhetorical device to develop a paragraph, while Americans who are good at abstract thinking prefer using evidence, facts and statistics to back up one's opinion. For the Chinese preferred strategy, the native English speakers would say that the structure is powerful, but the reasoning is empty. For native English speakers, 90% of them believe that their logical analysis should stand on the solid ground of specific truth, facts, evidences, statistics.

The third is the choice for subjectivity or objectivity. One foreign teacher working in China once complained that Chinese students are saying-oriented. They tend to cite famous sayings in their arguments, even in the letter of the application. This happens because in Chinese culture, also in some Asian cultures, people worship the ancestors, the heaven and earth, and the authority. However, according to Jia, the first thing for Westerners is to go beyond oneself and to seek the truth and to testify the truth built on objectivity-oriented evidence. When it comes to understanding the world, it helps them develop a science-oriented truth. To them, offering truth and lending their views credibility help convince readers of the validity of the writer's position.

Conclusion

The writing conventions are different from languages to languages and cultures to cultures. Paragraph development of Chinese language marked by indirectness strategy due to the ignorance of cultural differences is unconsciously encouraged in both high school and the university study, CET 4 and CET 6 training. Also, EFL writers in their assessment might well be influenced by the EFL teachers of mainland China, for some of teachers guide their students that way. This cognitive process has definitely left an imprint on the learners.

All cultures teach their readers preferred ways to respond to the world, which are often labeled as "appropriate" about what is 'right' or 'natural', and create emotional response to the cultural difference which interferes with our ability to understand the other cultures (Wolfson, 1989). Therefore, we can say an effective way of paragraph development or an essay is not just linguistically packaged idea, but also the rhetorically restricted or culturally determined. So, one inappropriate verbal behavior will inevitably prevent EFL learners from successful communication with the members of target language. To help improve the learning and teaching of EFL writing and to facilitate the cross-cultural communication, we need to conform to the shared norms of the target language, and guide EFL students into meeting of NS audience expectation of the target culture

The significance and pedagogical value of this empirical research on writing is that this research helps to arouse the great concern from the teachers and researchers relating to EFL or ESL writing for cultural difference in terms of the paragraph development, even essay development. As a language teacher, one needs to expose systematically his students to the cultural difference in terms of writing, to train his students to use discourse pattern of the target language, and to help them stay away from the influence of L1 discourse patterns when writing in English language. To help them deliver the intended message and communicate effectively in a written discourse, both ESL or EFL Chinese teachers need work with English language teachers and devote a certain amount of time and energy to exploring a desirable

approach so as to find out and solve the problems existing in many levels of students' English learning, which will surely smooth the communication in the written cross-cultural context.

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Appendix. Questionnaires

1. How long have you been learning English?
2. Are you a student English major or non-English major?
3. When did you start to learn English writing?
4. Did you start to learn writing expository and argumentative essays in high school or in university?
5. Have you ever been taught organization patterns of an English paragraph in your English writing class in high schools or universities?
6. Do you think you have problems with paragraph organization?
7. Have you even been taught about the development pattern of an English paragraph in high schools and universities?
8. Do you think you have problem with paragraph development?
9. When in high school and undergraduate study, what mistakes does your English teacher correct? Grammatical errors or logical mistakes?
10. Do you have the awareness of cultural differences in English paragraph writing in terms of development?