Investigating ESL Graduate Students' Intercultural Experiences of Academic English Writing: A First Person Narration of a Streamlined Qualitative Study Process

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This report is a first person narration of the entire process of a qualitative study exploring the impact of ESL students' native cultural and rhetorical conventions, as well as classroom cultures on their academic English writing in American universities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. A coding system was constructed to analyze transcriptions of the interviews. The study found that there were impacts of L1 culture on the students' academic English writing, but their effects were minor. The main factors associated with ESL students' English writing were their familiarity with the disciplinary contents and general composing skills. Implications for culturally responsive tertiary education and ESL writing instructions are discussed. Key Words: Intercultural Rhetoric, Ethnographic Study, Grounded Theory, Qualitative Research Process.

This report narrated in the first person, presents the process of a qualitative study exploring the impact of ESL graduate students' native cultural and rhetorical conventions as well as classroom cultures on their academic English writing in American universities. Numerous books have explored and illustrated the variations to the conceptualization of the qualitative research process in an extensive way (for example see Schram, 2006; Silverman, 2009). The process illustrated in these books that of proposing or conceptualizing a qualitative study with reference to the conventional approaches of qualitative studies (Schram, 2006; Silverman, 2009). While the conceptualized process is useful, qualitative novice researchers may be more interested in how the research process is emergent in an actual and completed study. This report is aimed at illustrating the streamlined process of a qualitative project and narrating episodes that happened during the research. In addition to reflections over the episodes, it is also my intention to directly inform readers of the streamlined qualitative study process from getting the research hunch all the way to the final choice of syntax in the conclusion.

Illustration of the qualitative research process is included, as qualitative researchers often consider the research process more important than the outcomes of the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Despite this, research reports are often still not minute enough so that novice researchers are able to see what the original process was in great detail. Most of the existing research reports (with the exception of Hu, 2009) record the successful experiences of the researchers, but not the failures as well as subtleties of mental changes, and then the following meditations over the failures and the resulting changes. For example, researchers' reflexivity is mentioned as a strategy for qualitative studies but is not consistently narrated and embedded in the flow of the research process.

A strong feature of a qualitative study is the emphasis on the authenticity of human experiences (Silverman, 2009), including both the participants' and the researchers' stories. Thus, a credible qualitative report is not only an interpretation of participants' experiences, but also a narration of researchers' original experiences during the study process. Additionally, the perception and interpretation of the research participants' experiences are constructed by the researcher based upon the researcher's previous and during-the-research experiences. In this sense, using the first person narrative perspective makes the description vivid to the readers and may be able to enhance the credibility of the report (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The process of the current study was initiated by the research hunch that emerged from a research experience when I interviewed a Hispanic college student. I asked her to do some analysis in her composition, and she said: "I can't". The response was so unexpected to me, a previous Chinese college teacher and an international teaching assistant in an American university. After reflecting upon this episode, I realized that there might be some cultural differences which cause minor conflicts between instructors and students from different cultural backgrounds due to the instructor's expectations rooted in his or her culture per se. Considering that I was an international student from China, I believed it would be better for me to focus my study on Chinese students in order to have an in-depth understanding of the participants and their stories from an emic angle.

In addition to my emic perspective, Chinese culture and language are different from those of English, which are rooted in Greek and Roman cultures. When Chinese students write English papers for English-speaking professors, there could be some disagreement and misunderstanding during cross-cultural writer and reader communication due to expectations transferred from the first language (L1) cultural and linguistic conventions. I thought it would be interesting to listen to the stories of what happened between Chinese graduate students and their English speaking professors when they were negotiating academic assignments. Another consideration of my doing such a study was the increasing number of Chinese students studying in American schools of all levels (Council of Graduate Schools Research Report, 2009). The CGS report states that mainland China is the second leading country of origin for international students in US graduate schools. Academic English writing determines the success of these Chinese graduate students' study and their academic career that follows.

The purpose of this study was aimed at investigating Chinese graduate students' English writing experiences in America, to examine the impact of Chinese cultural conventions on their academic English writing. As an international student from China and a former English teacher in a Chinese university, it would be beneficial for me to conduct such a study and have a better understanding of the participants' experiences from an emic angle (Sherman & Reid, 1994; Yeganeh, Su, & Chrysostome, 2004).

The following questions were investigated:

1. How do the participants describe their experiences of academic Chinese and English writing in China?

2. What factors associated with their previous writing experiences in China do they identify as impacting their academic English writing in American universities?

Theoretical Framework

This study was approached from the contrastive rhetoric and the intercultural rhetoric perspectives. Contrastive rhetoric is explained as the examination of similarities and differences in writing across cultures in terms of cultural and rhetorical patterns (Connor, 2004a). Such a research direction was initiated by studies in second language writing, which identified problems in composition ESL students encountered by comparing their thinking patterns with those of English rhetorical conventions (Kaplan, 1966; 1968). Differences were found in rhetorical conventions across cultures, which were identified as the causes that made ESL/EFL students' writing look different from the native perspective. It was assumed that there were different rhetorical patterns in different languages and cultures, and those patterns were transferable to second or foreign language writing. As a result of this previous knowledge, I hypothesized that Chinese ESL students' academic writing may be impacted by Chinese cultural and rhetorical conventions.

Intercultural rhetoric was derived from contrastive rhetoric, broadening the contrastive rhetorical study into different genres (Connor, 2004b). The concept of culture was also redefined to include disciplinary and classroom cultures, which were found to be more influential to students' writing than big national cultures (Connor, 2004b). Li (2008) enunciated the developing trend of contrastive rhetoric to study rhetoric interculturally and the shift of rhetorical research direction from contrasts to intercultural communication, from Eurocentric to ethnorelativism (Connor & Nagelhout & Rozycki, 2008). Connor (2002) ushered in the concept of intercultural rhetoric in an article regarding new directions in contrastive rhetorical research. The article suggested that future studies should be based on the notion of cultural fluidity, one of the key concepts in post-modern cultural studies, aside from fragmentation, discontinuity, multiplicity and plurality, and that dynamic interaction within and between cultures on the interface of cross-cultural writing and utterance was to be inquired about to explain the production and comprehension of texts. Studies of disciplinary and classroom culture should also be included in the research besides text analysis in cross-cultural context (Connor et al., 2008). Based upon this, my study was designed to explore possible cultural elements as well as individual differences in Chinese students' intercultural experiences of academic writing.

Methods

Participants and the Setting

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the criterion to select participants is not to generalize but maximize information that can be acquired in the study. In order to maximize knowledge, qualitative sampling is purposive and conducted in sequence. After examining one participant, the researcher should decide upon the next one according to

the preliminary data analysis findings from the first participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My three participants were selected sequentially after a preliminary brief talk with each of five Chinese graduate students, whom I was very familiar and in frequent contact with. Two of the five were not included in this study since they did not have enough experience to talk with me about academic English writing.

The three participants selected, Qiao, Yan and Liu, were Chinese graduate students in an American university. Yan and Liu were PhD students who had been educated in American universities for more than three years. Liu had studied in Europe for two years before he came to America. Qiao was a graduate student in a master's program, and had been here for more than one year. Liu was male, from the Department of Public Administration. Qiao and Yan were female, from the College of Education. All three participants gave me information of different focuses. Qiao, since she has been in America for approximately one year, could remember her writing experiences in China very well, so she provided much information on that focus. Liu and Yan were quite mature, and they were very certain about whether they had been impacted by Chinese cultural conventions in their academic English writing.

I was the researcher as well as a participant in this study. I listened to their stories and compared theirs with mine so as to make decisions on data analysis and interpretation. I had dual roles as the researcher as well as a participant with a dual linguistic and cultural backgrounds and a dual status of both a doctoral student and an international instructor in an American university (previously an English teacher in a Chinese university who made a persistent effort to figure out why Chinese college students could not write an English composition as complex as an English speaker). In the research, my own experiences oriented my expectations of the research results and my research interests. Reversely, the expectations and interests may possibly have been the hidden guidance in the qualitative interviews between the participants and me. Consequently, I might have pushed the interviewees in the direction as I expected and the interviewees, afraid of contradicting a former university instructor, might just follow the push and inform me as they thought I expected them to. My dual roles influenced data collection, analysis and interpretation and the participants in the process of interactions also influenced me. According to Jack (2008), authenticity and openness in the interactions, as well as reflexivity on the researcher's part during the research process are the key points to be kept in the researcher's mind in order to manage the conflicts and deal with issues caused by the dual role.

Research Approach

Specifically in this study, the multiple case and grounded theory approach were applied in order to have a better understanding of Chinese students' intercultural experiences of academic English writing in an American academic community. Though the grounded theory approach needs about 20 to 30 participants (Creswell, 2007) to generate a theory, the multiple case approach can build rich descriptions of a theoretical framework based on participants' experiences in intercultural academic writing. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the grounded theory approach can generate three levels of theories: substantive, middle-ranged, and formal. Positivists aim to discover formal and objective theories while post-positivists and constructivists aim to generate

substantive and middle-ranged theoretical frameworks (Charmaz, 2000, Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This study was mainly constructive and aimed at constructing a middle-ranged framework to interpret the participants' experiences. Based upon the insights and implications provided by previous studies concerning Chinese students' academic English writing (AEW) in North America, a rough theoretical framework was built to illustrate their experiences. By analyzing the interview data, the researcher expected to add more categories and associate them so as to refine the framework.

The Emerging Research Process

One of the challenges in conducting a qualitative study is the indeterminism of the research process. A well-stated research question may be finally formulated during or after data collection and analysis (Frankel & Devers, 2000; Hu, 2000). An emergent qualitative study can be discursive and data collection may be out of the researchers' control (Hu, 2000), which, still holds the potentials of revealing more knowledge (St. George & Wulff, 2000).

Similarly, as Bogdan and Biklen (1992) suggested, data analysis should start in the field to develop a research focus or narrow down the scope of data collection. Usually, at the beginning of data collection, researchers have broad ideas about what they are going to investigate in the research. After some initial interviews, they may find more themes or a specific interest of research. This happened in my study. Initially, with limited literature to refer to, I had only a general idea of what I wanted to examine. However, during the first interview and afterwards when I was transcribing, I found other topics that seemed pertinent, and as a result I refined my interview guide. I used the refined interview guide in my second and third interviews. This was also the moment when a more workable proposal was shaping. The research proposal was a starting point for the project. With the research under way, the proposal was then refined. Research questions and sub-questions were adjusted since during interviewing and transcribing, new themes were emerging. The following then details this process and how the research was completed as it emerged.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The first interview guide (See Appendix A) was developed through literature review (Hu, 2009; Hu-chou, 2000; Snively, 1999). After the preliminary data analysis of the first interview and based upon the emergent themes, the second interview guide was developed (See Appendix B). I conducted the interviews with the guide to ensure that the conversation in the interviews moved along the topical logic. At the same time, I also listened to some seemingly irrelevant stories in the interviews. Sometimes during the interviews, the participants' responses would go out of the framework of the interview guide, or they would think of an interesting story that they wanted to share it with me. Such a story was so spontaneous and unexpected to me that I regarded it as irrelevant. However, according Rubin and Rubin (1995), a statement that sounds unbelievable could be an important piece of information. This listening strategy turned out to be helpful to the study. One of the stories that initially seemed irrelevant was eventually, as I coded the transcripts and built

up the coding system, found to reflect an important theme.

Data Analysis

After data collection, analysis was conducted by open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the process of open coding, the interview guide was regarded as a thematic framework to locate important themes from the data so as to answer the research questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I believe that having the guide as a reference was especially helpful for me as a novice researcher who was not experienced enough to conduct a pure inductive process of coding and deal with a large number of emerging themes directly or indirectly related to the research topic. During axial coding, I reread and thought over the data, I found associations between the stories and literature, and then unexpected themes came into my mind. The accumulation of information and thoughts led data analysis to the meta-cognitive level, a level on which associations were built up and helped me to figure out insightful connections between the stories and themes. In this way, a coding system was built to analyze data (See Appendix C). The coding system was hierarchical and composed of categories, subcategories, themes and subthemes (Hu, 2009). In this process of coding, the coding system was gradually refined. Refinement of the coding system continued throughout the process of analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). I also asked one of the participants to member-check it.

How to Enhance Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of a qualitative research as explained by Merriam (2002) is "whether the study was conducted in a rigorous, systematic, and ethical manner, such that the results can be trusted" (p.24). Merriam suggested addressing this issue by dealing with internal and external validity, which is known as reliability and ethics in interpretive qualitative research. Internal validity in qualitative research means researchers' interpretations of data are congruent with participants' interpretations. In my research, in order to maintain internal validity of the research, member-checks and peer-review were applied. I asked one of my participants to check the coding system and one of my classmates to review my research report draft to see if they agreed with my analysis and interpretations. All of the three participants insisted that there were not much cultural impacts upon their academic English writing. This partially persuaded me to jump out of the existing theoretical framework and reconsider my data interpretations. By further exploring related research literature and thinking over the data, I found other themes from the data to support the participants' claim. Thus, data interpretation was revised.

External validity is sometimes called reader transferability in qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). It refers to the extent that readers can transfer the findings of the research to their own cases. Merriam (2002) asked researchers to provide rich and thick description about the research situation to enable readers to clarify what was going on in the specific research context and to tell whether their previous experiences were in alignment with this study situation. Thus in this research report, detailed information has been provided about the research process, the participants, research settings, the shaping of a research proposal and the methods of data collection, data analysis and data interpretations.

Reliability of qualitative research was conceptualized by Lincoln and Guba (1985) instead as "dependability". Dependability refers to the extent that readers are able to make sense of the research findings, considering the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.288). An audit trail "describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry" (Merriam, 2002, p.27). The audit trail, as discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is a method to enhance dependability, which means a reader can authenticate the findings of a study by following the trail of the researcher.

I kept track of this trail in my research journal throughout the research process, including my reflections, problems, inspirations, ideas, and how I shaped my proposal, collected and analyzed data. A lesson I learned about reflective journals in my study, is that it is really important to record everything a researcher has done in the process of research, including what is done, by what means and why, so that when it is time to draft the research report, a researcher can rely on the journals and retrieve all the detailed information needed for a trustworthy report (Merriam, 2002; Ortlipp, 2008).

Denzin (1994) described the researcher's subjectivity in qualitative studies as "the interpretative crisis" (p.501). How to manage subjectivity to the right extent has been a challenge for researchers (Peshkin, 1988). Emotions are necessary to motivate a qualitative researcher but according to some, they should be controlled to an extent (Peshkin, 1988; Ortlipp, 2008). One widely accepted solution to this issue is to keep reflective journals to record the researcher's experiences, reflections, feelings, goals, values and positions so as to make the research process transparent and the researchers' subjectivity transparent. (Harrison, MacGibbon & Morton, 2001; Mruck & Breuer, 2003; Ortlipp, 2008)

The ethics of the researcher and the research methods, determines the quality of the research. A good qualitative study should be done in an ethical manner (Merriam, 2002, p.29). In interviews, setting up rapport, trust, and partnership between the researchers and the participants has been paramount for successful qualitative studies (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Lam, 2007). The researcher, as a research instrument, is to assess the interviewing situation, understand the interviewee's culture in addition to language, and communicate with the interviewee. At the same time the researcher needs to promote a sense of mutual respect, be empathetic with the participants, and act as a thoughtful and active listener (Lam, 2007). In the present study, two of the participants were at the age of my college students in China. I may unconsciously have behaved as a college teacher because that was my profession in China. Fortunately, my teaching philosophy has been that a popular teacher is preferable to a stern one. Therefore, I conducted the interviews in a smooth, casual and conversational manner so that the interviewees felt relaxed and recalled many stories. After reading and rereading these stories, I came up with the interpretation of them with the themes and categories emerging from the data. In summary, the credibility or trustworthiness of this study was enhanced by keep subjectivity under control with peer review, member-checking and the research journal. Additionally, data were also collected in an ethical manner.

Results

Participants' Academic Chinese and English Writing Experiences in China

In order to find out how Chinese rhetorical conventions influenced participants' academic English writing, I asked my participants to describe their Chinese and English writing experiences in senior high school and Chinese universities, where they were educated with Chinese values and conventions by their Chinese instructors teaching them to write in Chinese or English.

Emphasis on Creativity in Chinese Compositions in Senior High Schools

Chinese essay writing in Chinese senior high schools emphasized that students' essays should be creative, out of ordinary expectations but to the point and persuasive. One of the ways is to make use of rhetorical devices, such as simile, analogy, and personification etc. in the right place to touch the readers. One of the participants said:

> Compared with writing Chinese essays, GRE writing is too simple. There are a lot of requirements for Chinese essay writing. We need to think about rhetoric, different type of questions, rhetorical questions, personification, metaphor or simile, analogy and choice of words. By choice of words, if you make more use of four-character phrases, you writing will be regarded as higher level of writing, which is considered better than otherwise. And then creativity. For GRE writing, as far as you present clear logic in your writing, your writing will be given good comments. But if we write Chinese essays in the same way as GRE writing, that will be definitely considered as bad writing. When you write Chinese essays, you need to write in a different way, unique, impressive at the first sight. It is not enough to just be reasonable. You need to make your essay different from others in an impressive way. The requirements in English essay writing are so strict, too strict.

Snively (1999) described this Chinese rhetorical convention as indirectness, which is highly valued in Chinese writing: one should not state one's opinion directly. Snively (1999) suggested four writing practices that show this indirectness: a) an overall tendency to begin very generally; b) a reliance on history in the introduction; c) a tendency to shift abruptly after making one's major point; and d) impressionistic conclusions. In addition to these four practices, another element in Chinese writing is the use of rhetorical devices such as personification, parallelism, rhetorical questions, analogy, and metaphor. These devices make Chinese writing indirect and different from English writing which values the style of directness, conciseness and clarity (Snively, 1999).

Emphasis on Clarity in English Compositions in Chinese Senior High Schools and Chinese Disciplinary Academic Writing in universities

Though creativity is greatly stressed in Chinese compositions in senior high schools, in English compositions, clarity is still the criterion for good writing in Chinese senior high schools. Compared with Chinese compositions, English compositions were so easily composed, according to Qiao. As mentioned above, in terms of composing difficulties, GRE essay writing was considered much simpler than Chinese compositions. She said that in writing English compositions, what they were asked to do was to embody three parts: introduction, body and ending in one composition. Priority should be given to clarity instead of creativity.

Another participant, Yan, mentioned her thesis for bachelor degree in advertisement. She tried to compare two models in the thesis and followed the English writing model of comparison and contrast though the thesis was written in Chinese. From this, we can tell that Chinese academic writing in universities has the same rhetorical structure as English rhetorical conventions. Qiao remembered that her Chinese academic disciplinary writing in the field of international trade was required to follow the criterion of clarity. She said:

> …at college we were asked to write essays in Chinese. I found that that essay writing was quite similar to English essay writing. Just say what you want to say, no need to use rhetorical devices. The purpose of your writing is to let laymen to understand what you are writing about. Don't use too many technical words.

Here, it can be revealed that English compositions in Chinese high schools and Chinese disciplinary academic writing in universities follow the criterion of clarity. Qiao's college professor's requirements concerning academic disciplinary writing in Chinese was similar to what was mentioned in An *American Rhetoric* (Watt, 1957) that writing should be very clear so that even a layman can understand what is in the writing.

Writing Experiences at an American University

Influence from Chinese cultural schemata. A widely accepted definition of culture explains it as a set of rules and patterns shared by a given community (Goodenough, 1964). Cultural schemata refer to the ideological modes well-established in a cultural convention. People's thinking in that culture is to some extent prescribed by the ideological background knowledge. China's five-thousand-year history accumulated a number of such ideological modes that impact upon Chinese people's thinking and, accordingly, rhetoric (Lin, 1999). When writing English papers in America, Qiao was influenced by her Chinese cultural schemata. She made use of the term "people" many times in her paper. Her professor asked her to change "people" into "individuals". This seemed to be just different choices of words, but to some extent it signified the cultural differences between the east and the west, between collectivism and individualism.

Confucianism was the school of philosophy that had been influencing or even dominating Chinese cultural conventions. It advocated collectivism and harmony among

people, who were organized in a hierarchical relationship and took reciprocal obligations. Mutual respect was highly valued, and so was the willingness to participate in the making of communal harmony (Ames, 1991). In order to cater to the needs of the community, individuals were expected to give up their own benefits for the sake of the community they were in. This collectivism was delivered to students in schools by teachers, and children at home by parents. Confucianism suggested that education should emphasize teaching by strict moral models (Young, 1994), which helped to consolidate the social hierarchy and communal harmony.

The participant was educated under that influence, which asked individuals in the society to give priority to communal benefits over individuals'. "People" has been a concept internalized in social individuals' minds. As Snively (1999) explained, when Chinese writers wrote, the readers in their minds were "billions of people". They were not writing for any specific group. The impacts of collectivism on Chinese people's English writing were also reflected in their internet discussion about a Chinese victimized in a law case (Bloch, 2004). The other Chinese associated the case of the victimized Chinese with themselves, and suspected that some day they would be victimized in the same way. Chinese people regarded themselves as a community, in which everyone's fate is related with all others'.

The Chinese Nonverbal, Pictorial Logic vs. the Western Verbal Logic

Two of the participants met with logical problems in their writing. Their professors thought that their writing logics were discontinuous, and suggested that they should unfold their logics step by step in details. One of the participants owed this logical discontinuity to the different thinking patterns between English and Chinese.

Researchers did some exploration in the issue of culturally different logic in western alphabetic languages and Chinese logographic language (Shen, 1989). Chinese poems highlight the use of the technique of *yi jing*意境, of creating a picture in the mind, which accounts for the Chinese nonverbal, pictorial logic. Shen (1989) explained that it was a thinking process conducted largely in pictures and then transcribed into words. The picture described by the poet is taken over and developed by the reader. The imagination of the author and the imagination of the reader are thus overlapping (Shen, 1989).

This pictorial logic has been pervasively used in poems and descriptive writings in Chinese. Pound (as cited by Ayers, 2004) owed this pictorial logic to Chinese characters, which he learned about from the scholar Ernest Fenollosa whose book *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* Pound edited and brought to press. This book emphasized that the Chinese ideogram was pictorial in nature, and therefore it offered a more direct mode of communication than Western phonetic script (Ayers, 2004).

In English writing, logic is conceptualized by the arrangement of propositional content and managing the systems of cohesion and coherence. To some extent, this conceptualization is culturally defined (Kaplan, 1988). In the United States, two traditions are reflected in the writing education: one is syllogistic and the other is hierarchical (Wilkerson, 1986). Great value is placed on clarity and precision in the framework of a rigorously logical system (Kaplan, 1988). In order to get used to this English rhetorical convention, Chinese students need practice. Both of the two

participants indicated that they could apply the western verbal logic quite well in their academic writing after they studied here for one year.

Factors Associated with Chinese Students' Academic Writing

Factors that may influence students' L2 writing include language proficiency, literacy experience, exposure to formal instruction, exposure to native home language and native culture, and residence abroad (Hu-chou, 2000). In this research, the participants found three factors associated with their academic writing in English: content familiarity, linguistic differences and Chinese rhetorical expectations.

Content Familiarity. Stapleton's (2001) study of 45 Japanese undergraduate students claimed that the quality of critical thought depended on the topic content. A familiar topic generated better critical thinking. Results of his study suggested that lack of critical thinking in Asian students' English writing was not due to cultural conventions but the extent of content familiarity. One of the participants in the study revealed this causality by identifying the lack of experiences in the content areas or content unfamiliarity as the cause of difficulty in academic writing in English. She also indicated that critical thinking was one of the important criteria for "good writing" in college entrance exams in China.

The following conversation shows that, in my participant's opinion, content familiarity influences her academic English writing:

L: In senior high, did your teacher teach you the patterns or models of writing English composition?

Q: It is such a long time ago. At that time, English composition is argumentative. I remember I never felt hard to write English composition. Just write down what's in my mind. As soon as I got an idea, I could write the composition easily, much more easily than writing Chinese composition.

L: Is it the same to write essays or papers here?

Q: Er, It will not be so easy because it takes some time to think over the topic. Usually, it may take me a long time to think and then I will spend a short period of time to write in an intense way. It is hard to write here, like squeeze the toothpaste, little by little. But I can still squeeze out ideas.

L: It is quite different from your writing experiences in China, right?

Q: Yes, at that time, topics are very familiar to me.

L: Now, you find it difficult to write because of….

Q: Content. I am not very familiar with content, or the course I am taking. It has nothing to do with English language, but the course content. As far as I get an idea, I can express myself in very simple English. So sometimes it happened that people can't understand what I have written down.

She told me an example to show that if she was familiar with the content, it would be possible for her writing to be accepted even without writing center's help under the condition that she has been studying in America for almost one year.

L: Do you still feel English writing difficult for you now? Or is it quite ok for you?

Q: Fairly well. I have been here for almost one year.

L: Do you remember the paper critique for EDF5481?

Q: Oh, I finished that critique within one day and one night. Since it was almost due, I had to finish it. I even hadn't thought about it before since I felt that it was not very difficult, and then I just put the task aside, unwilling to deal with it. That's the most torturing thing I had ever done since first I needed to read the paper and then write. But I wrote it all with my own words. I tried "turn-it-in", no overlapping except the title of the paper I reviewed. One of my classmates wrote the same critique. She was not so lucky. She got 20% overlapping. Considering her experiences, I was very careful to write the critique with my own words. I even didn't go to the writing center and submitted it to the professor. The professor accepted it without much comment. He said ok to my critique.

L: Do you think it is hard to finish that critique?

Q: Yes, it is hard. The process is torturing. First, we read an article, and then analyze it. Just like what we often did in China, when we were given a text, and were asked to analyze the text. What's the first part about, the second, and the third…I have learned from the course, and then I know what to write about. I felt that course was quite helpful. The research methods were explained systematically.

The participant found herself more ready to write the critique because in the course she was taught how to organize the critique and enough content knowledge to fill in that framework. On one hand, this story shows that content familiarity is a factor that influences academic English writing; on the other hand, it also shows that explicit instruction about writing and content knowledge can make Chinese students better equipped in dealing with writing assignments.

Linguistic Differences. Besides familiarity with content and topic, another factor is linguistic differences between Chinese and English. These differences make Chinese students subject to some weaknesses in English writing. In terms of writing, there are significant linguistic differences between English and Chinese. Lin (1999) summarized these differences in the important areas of writing interlanguage on the basis of Taborek and Adamowski's (1984) study.

This linguistic concern cannot be ignored due to the fact that English and Chinese are two totally different languages, with one being alphabetic and the other logographic. Chinese verbs are not inflexible, unlike English verbs, which are inflexible to indicate numbers, genders, tenses and moods. So, Chinese students have great difficulties in distinguishing the usages of different tenses and moods. It is also understandable that there are numerous slips when it comes to singular verbal forms and gender consistency. Prepositions cause as much trouble as verbal forms since there are not as many prepositions in Chinese as in English.

These are basic linguistic differences, but if they interact with each other in the writing, they may bring about some rhetorical conflicts which cannot be solved. A similar story happened to one participant. As of our interview, she still could not accept a mistake as perceived by a writing center assistant. That mistake was repetition, which she considered as natural and necessary, but the assistant regarded it as unacceptable. The participant owed this conflict to linguistic differences between English and Chinese. In Chinese, she could use an attributive in front of the subject of the sentence to deliver the message necessary for logical flow, but in English she had to use an attributive clause, which caused the repetition to be so conspicuous as to be unacceptable. In the end, she had to delete that clause with regret since she thought a necessary message should be there, but could not due to rhetorical inappropriateness in English. The participant described her experiences like this:

Q: There are two people there helping us to write. One of them is a man he would take your paper and read through it. Then he told me I should do some revision. For example, there are some repetitions, and I needed to revise

L: We won't make the same mistake in Chinese, right? If we have already said something, we won't repeat it since that is our first language. But English is a second language world, sometimes we are not very clear about what we are writing about. Do you think so?

Q: No, I don't think so. For example, last semester, I did an assessment of your daughter's language skills. I said her mother was an English teacher, and she could teach her English. If I write in Chinese, an attributive put in front of the subject will do, but In English I need to use a long clause. Then I was told that this information had been given before. I needn't repeat it. But I felt it so natural to repeat it in order to stress the causal relationship. If not, I felt my explanation was inadequate.

L: When we are writing, we will be unavoidably influenced by Chinese rhetorical conventions.

Q: Right. When I was writing here, I felt that if I could write in Chinese, it would be better.

This phenomenon was explained by researchers of contrastive rhetoric (Kaplan, 1966; Snively, 1999), who claimed that the Chinese approach to academic writing was like peeling an onion, layer by layer. In the end, the core of the issue was revealed. This cycling process looked indirect and repetitious. On the contrary, the English way of approaching an issue was linear and direct. Repetition would be regarded as improper.

Prepositions in English are very different from the prepositions in Chinese in quantity and variety. It is widely accepted that it is difficult for Chinese students to learn English prepositions because in Chinese there are not such a variety of prepositions in use. One of my participant acknowledged that she found using English prepositions difficult:

L: Now let's talk about English writing. Now you may have written some essays assigned by the professors. What about their feedback or comments? Will there be some grammatical mistakes?

Q: Yes.

L: Will there be any moment when they said that they couldn't understand what you have written?

Q: Yes. (Very assured) Very often.

L: Why was that?

Q: When the professor said she couldn't understand a paragraph, I also vaguely felt that the paragraph was not written in the right English way. I put a lot of clauses in the sentence, which seemed discontinued. Then I had to explain to the professor with simple sentences and simple words. Then she understood at last, and she rewrote my sentence. I found that what she wrote was really authentic, but I couldn't write in such a way.

L: Usually Chinese students are good at grammar, and we think if we can put the words together according to grammatical ways, it is OK.

Q: I am not good at using prepositions. This is one of the reasons.

Chinese Rhetorical Expectations

Qiao found her initial papers unacceptable to the writing center assistants. Almost every sentence would be revised. She owed this to her rhetorical expectations from Chinese writing, which required people to write in a non-linear and complicated way. Due to these conventions, she tried to write every English sentence with complexity, by combining clauses together in one sentence, which obviously was unacceptable according to English rhetoric requirements.

Chinese rhetorical expectations may stand in the way at the initial stage of Chinese graduate students' socialization into American academic communities. At the initial stage, they tend to write according to Chinese rhetorical conventions until they are informed of the western rhetorical requirements. Qiao remarked that at the beginning, she tried so hard to make her sentences complex since she considered complexity as the criterion for good English writing. One year later, being informed of the criteria of simplicity and clarity, she discarded Chinese conventional impacts and made efforts to use simple English words and syntaxes to clarify her ideas in her writing. She succeeded in the end and need not go to writing center to seek help any more. Actually, in the interview, she came to realize that she was already taught how to think in a linear way in English compositions in high schools and academic disciplinary writing in Chinese universities. She just failed to make use of the knowledge in her writing in America or did not remember how she was taught to writing academically in China when she was asked to deal with academic writing assignments. If she had realized earlier, she would not have made so many mistakes at the initial stage.

Discussions

When I began this research study, I had certain expectations in mind. With the impact of pre-existent theory, I expected to collect data to support the hypothesis of

contrastive rhetoric that students in different cultures may think differently in their writing. I presupposed that Chinese graduate students' academic English writing would be impacted by Chinese cultural conventions to a great extent. Such an expectation interfered with data analysis and interpretation, and perplexed me since the data I collected did not support the hypothesis.

After thinking and rethinking and much reflection I became aware that though the Chinese students in this study are rooted in Chinese rhetorical conventions, they also received educational influence similar to the western cultural conventions, so in spite of some minor difficulties caused by cultural differences, such as ideological difference, writing interlanguage and rhetorical complexity, their major problems with English academic writing were associated with content familiarity. If they were very familiar with disciplinary knowledge and academic community rules, it was not very hard for them to finish a good piece of academic writing.

In fact, I had difficulty in choosing the right syntax to enunciate the conclusion. It could be concluded that though these Chinese graduate students were impacted by Chinese cultural conventions, the major factor was content familiarity. Or I could also conclude in an alternative way that though the main factor in these Chinese students' academic writing is content familiarity, Chinese cultural conventions' impacts should not be neglected since knowing these impacts is important to understand their writing. Which one I can choose is determined by my research intention of pedagogical implications. If my research intention were to inform writing instruction in various disciplines, the former would be preferred. If my research is intended to promote multiculturalism and multicultural education, the latter should be decided upon. If I had both of the two research intentions in mind, these two patterns of syntax should be mentioned.

Implications

Implications for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Ethnocentrism vs. Ethnorelativism

Similar to multicultural education brought about by Civil Right Movements in 1960s, culturally responsive pedagogy, also called critical pedagogy, influenced by Paulo Freire, has been used to provide equal educational opportunities to indigenous youth for over 40 years (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). In the 1980s and 1990s, there was an increasing number of racially and ethnically diverse students in U.S. schools, which brought the discussion of culturally responsive education into the mainstream. Pewewardy and Hammer (2003) noted that much was learned about student motivation, resistance, culture and cognition, and language and cognition.

Ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism are two important concepts concerning culturally responsive pedagogy. Ethnocentrism assumes that the world view of one's own culture is central to all reality, which may result in negative stereotyping of others' languages and cultures. Ethnorelativism, on the other hand, is tolerant of differences in behavior and cultures. If a contrastive rhetoric study considers Anglo-American writing rhetoric as good and regards it as the standard, it will be criticized for being ethnocentric. Many early contrastive rhetoric studies were claimed to be so (Connor, 1996). In order to avoid stereotyping languages and cultures in our multicultural education, awareness and

knowledge of the differences should be stressed, perceptions of values in different cultures should be enhanced, and students' L1 culture should be embedded in the instruction. In this study, two participants said that Chinese rhetorical pattern 起承**转合** (qi cheng-zhuan-he) had similar rhetorical structure with GRE analytical writing. In China, some college English teachers made use of this Chinese rhetorical pattern to teach English essay writings. Such a strategy was also included in some handbooks of writing English compositions in China. The research findings in this study implied that, to improve education quality, sufficient understanding of others' culture and integrating others' cultural elements may facilitate ESL students' learning and make their learning experiences more meaningful and thus engaging to them. Another advantage of adhering to enthnorelativism is that it helps both educators and students to identify the core knowledge by comparing knowledge from different cultural background. If the knowledge exists in different cultures, it probably is the core knowledge due to its consistency of existence in different cultures.

Implications for Cross-cultural Writing Instructions in Disciplines

Research has suggested that awareness of cultural differences could help instructors of writing courses have a better understanding of their students' L2 writing process and accordingly adjust their writing instructions (Snively, 1999; Hu, 2000). Snively's research implied the importance of explicit English writing instructions i.e. explicitly telling non-native students what they should write and how. Delpit (1988) saw an obvious analogy between initiating academic enculturation and starting village life adjustment in Alaskan Native communities. She found it easier to live a village life if she was told directly of the preferred dress code, interaction styles, taboo words and actions, and other such matters. It was suggested that explicit teaching of the forms of academic discourse may reveal social context to students and generate discipline knowledge (Williams & Colomb, 1993; Cintron, 1993). Such rhetorical strategies as cohesive devices (Gao, 2003), topical structure analysis (Connor & Farmer, 1990) and Toulmin Model (Hegelund & Kock, 2003; Saneh, 2009) have been recognized as effective for ESL/EFL students to write and revise their academic assignments.

Implications for Qualitative Novice Researchers

There are many variations to the process of a qualitative study though the core parts are the same, composed of the recognition of research interest, the researcher's positioning, the establishment of research questions and research approach, data collection, analysis and interpretation, conclusions and implications (Schram, 2006). In this research process, as a novice researcher I have been confronted with the presuppositions generated from the literature review. Unaware of the presuppositions, the novice researcher may presume or expect some results even before data collection, analysis and interpretation. The presumptions also influence the identification of more categories and then the way to associate categories and establish the relationships between them, as I have been confronted with in this study.

The issue of literature review in grounded theory studies has been discussed previously (Hickey, 1997; Heath. 2006; McGhee, Marland & Atkinson, 2007). Hickey

(1997) proposed that literature review should be conducted and regarded as data after the theory emerged. Such a maxim was reviewed by researchers recently. Heath (2006) argued that the emergent theory might also bias literature review in view of the maxim. McGhee et al. (2007) discussed about the use of a substantial topic-related initial literature review in a grounded theory study. Both the advantages and disadvantages have been recognized: while literature review may establish presuppositions and biases before the study it may also familiarize the researcher with the topical context and help define concepts and constructs, formulate specific research questions, and make methodological options. Another fact to refute the maxim of avoiding pre-study literature review is that some experienced researchers very probably initiated a study with plenty of relevant knowledge in the mind, whether they consulted literature or not. According to my experiences in this study, I agree with the suggestion that it is important for researchers to be reflexive and use constant comparative methods during the research process to avoid misconceptions and biases (McGhee et al., 2007). These two strategies may keep the researcher open to more research possibilities and even some opposing research expectations. Aware of the possibilities, researchers can manage the restraints of presuppositions and make the research process more flexible and explorative. To summarize, I suggest that literature review can be conducted before and all through the study for the purpose of theoretical, conceptual and methodological orientation, comparison and emancipation to enhance the trustworthiness and usefulness for research consumers. Biases caused by pre-study literature review can be handled by reflectivity and constant comparative methods.

Conclusion

I conclude with an analogy that attempts to tentatively theorize the process of qualitative research by comparing the theoretical orientation of Chinese and English contrastive rhetoric with the process of qualitative research since there is such a logical similarity between them. Contrastive rhetoric was initiated with the discovery of rhetorical non-linearity in Chinese students' English writing, recognized as resulting from Chinese rhetoric conventions. Later, studies also found that their English writing could also be linear, depending upon the topic or genre. Finally, it is generally agreed that there is a linear logic cuing through the text, and yet modifications also exist, depending upon the writers' knowledge background and requirements from the task and the academic community.

It is also true of qualitative research, which has been recognized as emergent. However, the specific procedures occurring during the process of emergence is not always adequately described. Simply, because the question of how qualitative research emerges is not always clearly answered, it leaves the process of the qualitative research untheorized. Like the linearity and non-linearity issue in Chinese students' English writing, the process of a qualitative study can be streamlined as presented by this article, and yet some hidden processes also exit, such as literature review, which for this study was on-going through the whole process from the very beginning of the study until even the end and including the manuscript review process. As well, data collection can be preparatory, systematic or formal and compensatory, and occurs through the much of the research process. Data interpretation is more cognitively demanding involving intensive

and flexible mental activities. Since the research context is expanding or developing, literature review should be carried out accordingly to track down the development. Constant comparison may formulate fresh reflections which drive more data interpretation, and probably compensatory data collection. In theory, this process can be endless, or *emergent*.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. What are the elements that influence your writing? What makes you feel that writing at college is difficult or easy?
2. Do you think writing in English is difficult for you? If yes, what are the difficulties? If no, are you confident about your composition? Why or why not?
3. If you are asked to rank the four types of writing: narration, exposition, comparison and contrast, and argument, according to their difficulty levels from the most difficult to the least, how would you like to arrange the four? If you can't tell, tell me why.
4. When you are writing, what process have you gone through?
5. Have you been taught how to write in your own culture? Have you been taught how to write in English? Are they different? Which one do you prefer, and why?
6. If you are asked to teach writing in a college, how are you going to teach?
7. When you are writing, are you translating from your native language to English?
8. Are there any topics that you find difficult to write about? What are they? Why are they difficult to write about?
9. What is your best work now? Can you say something about it?
10. When you are writing, do you pay more attention to meaning or grammar? Why?
11. When you are asked to write a research report, do you feel anxious about that? Do people in your culture believe in research?
12. What else do you want to say about writing at college?
13. In your eyes, what is good writing? What is original writing?
14. Can writing help you learn? Or do you think writing is one means of learning?

15. What do you think about the organization of an essay: introduction, supporting details and conclusion? Is it different from your culture? What's the case in your culture?

Appendix B

Interview Guide

I am interested in your academic writing experiences at this American university. Do you agree to talk with me about that? Thank you.

Personal Information:

1.   How many years have you been here in this university?
2.   Where are you from in China?
3.   What was your major in China?
4.   What is your major now?

Chinese Academic Writing Experiences

1.   What do you think about your Chinese academic writing experiences? Are they different from those of here?
2.   How would you like to describe the experiences of writing papers and essays in China?
3.   What did the instructors teach you to write a good Chinese essay or paper? Or in your Chinese instructors' eyes, what are the standards of a good essay?
4.   What were the factors that influenced your writing of essays in China?
5.   Do you still remember writing for college entrance exams?
6.   Is there any pattern for college entrance exam writing?
7.   What's the difference between GRE writing and College entrance exam writing?
8.   Let's talk about Chinese essay patterns. Have you heard about *qi, cheng, zhuan, he*? Tell me about that?
9.   Have you heard about eight-legged essays?

English Writing in China

1.   In your senior high, did you write English composition very often?
2.   Tell me about your English writing experiences in China, please.
3.   What were the important things to keep in mind when you wrote English compositions in China?
4.   Is it similar to your writing here?
5.   Can you tell me your English writing experiences in Chinese universities? Were they helpful for your English writing now? What do you think was helpful for your English writing now?

English Academic Writing Experiences in the American University

1. During your study here, you sometimes may need to write papers or essays. Tell me about your experiences about that, please.
2. Are your experiences of writing here similar to those in China?
3. When you submit a paper to your instructor, usually what comments can you get from the instructor?
4. What do you think about those comments?
5. How do you address the concerns of your English speaking instructors?
6. Is there any grammatical mistake in your English paper? What usually do your professors say about that?
7. Is there any moment when your professor said what you have written down couldn't be understood? Why was that?
8. What are the factors do you think that influence your academic writing here?
9. If you need help for English academic writing, who do you turn to for help? Can you tell your experiences about that?
10. What did the professors usually do to your papers? Do you agree?
11. What do you think of the writing style of English papers? Is it the same like writing in Chinese?
12. Do you find English writing useful for you?
13. When we are writing English, do you think we will be influenced by our Chinese thinking?

Appendix C

Coding System

Themes and Subthemes

1. **Academic Chinese writing experiences in China**

   Writing argumentative or expository essays in senior high school
     Formal explicit instruction
       Thinking patterns
     Criteria for good Chinese essays
       Rhetorical devices
       Four-character phrases
       Creative and persuasive
       Thinking patterns

   Writing papers in content areas in universities
     Criteria for good Chinese paper
       Clear, simple, even laymen can understand
       Not to copy

Thinking patterns
Linear (comparison in English writing convention)

2. **Academic English writing experiences in China**

English writing experiences in senior high school

Frequent practice
Familiar topics
Calligraphy
Stress for grammar

English writing experiences in universities
Learn nothing
Teaching reform
Teacher qualifications
Textbooks

3. **Academic English writing at the American University**

Writing center
Logic or clue through the paper
Grammar
Gradual progress with the help of the writing center

Professors
Good advice
Content, logic
If acceptable, won't correct (grammar)
Can't understand what is written (all participants)
Revise the sentence to a small extent

Participants
Participants' self-assessment of their own writing
Put a lot of clauses in a sentence, discontinuous
Not good at using prepositions (Chinese and English difference)
Write without translation
Think for a long time, squeeze out ideas and write intensively
Not logical, thinking jumps, discontinued
Participants' perceptions of good English writing

Changeable sentence patterns
Write in a clear and simple way to make ourselves understood
Writing can improve English level
In a clear step-by-step logic
Methodology

4. **Factors influence English academic writing**
    Lack of experiences: Not familiar with the course content. If familiar, not difficult (e.g. critique writing)
    Academic sources
    Translation from Chinese
    Chinese linguistic influence
    Chinese logical influence

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