

## The Impact of Cultural Thought Patterns Upon English Writing

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### Abstract

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the four basic skills that English learners are required to master. Chinese learners often complain that they are frustrated by the enormous difficulties in English writing because it is a complex and dynamic process. In terms of macro approach, English writing has been closely related to several fields such as second language acquisition, English teaching, cross-cultural communication, and discourse analysis. In terms of micro approach, English writing has been affected by individual differences like language proficiency and cultural knowledge. This thesis mainly discusses the impact of cultural thought patterns upon L2 writing. In general, Chinese students are more inclined to employ inductive strategy in their English writing while westerners favor deductive strategy. Chinese L2 writing is, in general, less objective and credible.

**Key words:** Cultural thought patterns; L2 writing; Writing strategies

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### INTRODUCTION

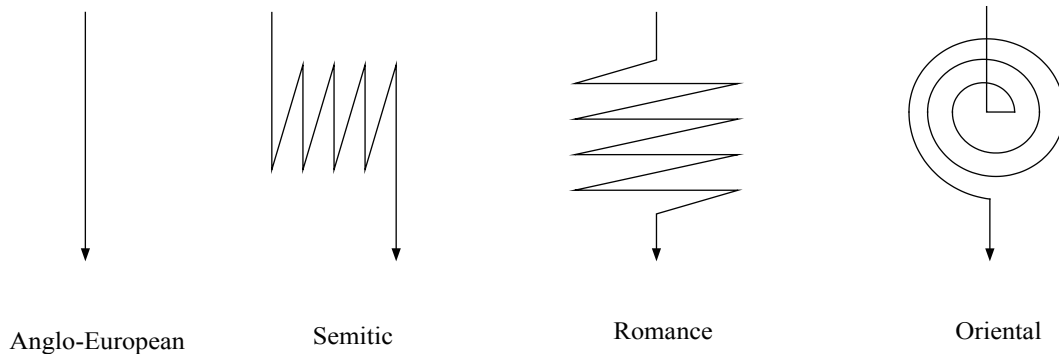
Writing is a complex process of language communication and a creative thinking process (Zuo, 2002, p.197), in which a writer needs to experience complex mental organizations of lexical choices, structural options and appropriate organization of content and form. Wang (2000) claimed: Being a complex cognitive activity, writing a good essay is an organic organization of content and form. English teachers have often been puzzled by the difficulties they encounter in trying to get Chinese students to organize their English writing in a way that strikes natives as natural. As early as 1889, Watters observed that Chinese speakers and writers organized their discourses in ways which presented interpretive difficulties for English users (Kirk-Patrick, 1995, p.1). People have attempted to explain this phenomenon from various perspectives such as the students' English language proficiency and the differences between English and Chinese styles. For the last few decades Chinese researchers have tried to discover the dissimilarities of thought patterns between easterners and westerners. In this paper, the author makes a critical study on contemporary contrastive rhetoric at home and abroad, identifies some rhetorical devices and markers that may cause differences in English and Chinese writing, and discusses their influence upon L2 writing.

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign scholars have made some research discoveries on L2 writing, among whom Robert B. Kaplan is a representative. Kaplan noted that ESL students did not write in the way that was expected by natives. In other words, what the students wrote was not necessarily wrong in grammar, but it was not idiomatic in terms of discourse requirement. In an attempt to examine this phenomenon,

Kaplan conducted a research into the rhetorical practices of students whose first language was not English. In 1966, Kaplan published his paper in language learning entitled *Cultural Thought Pattern in Intercultural*

*Education*. Contrasting with the normal, linear topic development expected by native readers of English, Kaplan divides thought pattern into four major language groups:



**Figure 1**  
**Kaplan's Presentation of the Ethnicity-Based "Cultural Thought Patterns" (Ding, 2004, p.229)**

Figure 1 is a diagrammatic representation of four cultural thought patterns related to four language groups respectively. The first, also the simplest diagram, represents English language group. It is a vertical straight line with a downward-pointing arrow typifying the linear logical development of the English paragraph that begins with a topic statement, then develops that topic with related ideas supporting it, and at last makes a conclusion of the whole essay. Thus, English paragraph development is characterized by linearity, directness, clarity, and logic, which in general, is regarded as critical criteria of good English writing by natives. The second diagram is the representation of Semitic language group, which is composed of a series of forward-moving, zigzagged lines signifying parallelistic movements. It suggests that "Semitic" paragraph development relies on "a complex series of parallel constructions" that are of the same importance in the whole essay. Thus, parallelism is the most salient characteristic in "Semitic" paragraph development. However, to native speakers of English, this kind of paragraph development is not appreciative, because each individual parallel construction is as important as others and people can hardly or cannot at all find out the focus of an essay. The third diagram is the representation of "Romance" language group which is characterized as a digressive back-and-forth zigzag. It means that "Romance" languages show "much greater freedom to digress or to introduce extraneous material". The last diagram is the representation of the oriental language group including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thailand, and so on. "Oriental" group is designated by a circular, spiral line suggesting of "indirection". Reflected in the paragraph development, the organization of the oriental writing is "out of the point", "out of focus", "indirect", and even "awkward" for English natives, who are likely to have a prejudice against the oriental people who are interpreted as incapable of grasping the main

idea of an essay or as not so honest and straightforward as westerners.

Many people consider Kaplan's classification is too general and simplistic. For example, oriental language group consists of many languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Korean. Though they are close in geography and they have been influenced with each other by culture exchange for a long time, they have their own distinctive rhetoric conventions respectively. The sequence of (Qi-Cheng-Zhuan-He) has been recognized as one of the standard rhetorical patterns of East Asian writing (Hinds, 1992). However, owing to different histories and conventions, there are still divergences in the definition of each step. Therefore, Kaplan's classification of language groups is open to question. For the purpose of gaining accuracy and objectivity, we'd better make a comparison between languages rather than language groups. Thus, in this paper, the author will narrow down the scope and only study the differences between English and Chinese.

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## 2. BODY PART

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In this part, the author will identify some rhetorical devices and markers that cause differences in English and Chinese writing, and discuss their influence upon writing.

### 2.1 The Major Rhetorical Differences in English and Chinese Writing

The main notion behind contrastive rhetoric is that rhetorics vary across cultures (Purves, 1988), which has been supported by many studies even though it has still remained controversial. Let's look at the following examples before we concern ourselves about the major rhetorical differences in English and Chinese writing.

Example One:

[Qi] Human beings know the world and learn each other by means of speaking and writing.

[Cheng] Thus, we know how important communication is for us to know ourselves and the world. Computer knowledge is of great significance for us to communicate effectively at present.

[Zhuan] It is necessary for everyone, no matter what job he or she is engaged in, to broaden one's mind through communication with others, computer knowledge can make such communications more effective so as to broaden one's mind.

[He] Therefore, it is of great importance to master necessary computer knowledge at present. (Translated from Shouhua Qi, 2001, p.130)

Example Two:

[Thesis statement] Nowadays, it is of great value to master necessary computer knowledge.

[Proof One] First, computer knowledge can make interpersonal communication more effective. Word processing technology can make writing, revising, storing, printing, and copying more convenient. Moreover, through Internet you can make connect with any person at any time in any place on the earth only if that person has a computer linking with the Internet.

[Proof Two] In addition, at present, more and more enterprises begin to use computers. One can hardly find an ideal job without basic computer knowledge.

[Proof Three] Besides, it is good for one to play various high-tech games and have a chat with others via Internet in one's spare time.

[Conclusion] Therefore, it is hard to imagine how a modem-minded person lives if he does not master basic computer knowledge.

We can see that the above two examples convey the similar information, yet the information has been organized in different ways. Example one is a representation of Chinese students' essays. Such an essay is organized in accordance with the traditional writing rule "Qi-Cheng-Zhuan-He". This rule has been regarded as a variant of eight-part essay and as golden laws and precious rule in modern Chinese writing from time to time. Western scholars and university faculty members are often disappointed by essays organized in this way because the first three parts are not pertinent to the subject. Readers can't definitely determine the thesis of the essay before they reach the conclusion part. For readers who are unaware of the "Qi-Cheng-Zhuan-He" writing rule, it is hard to understand such an essay. In their opinion, it seems as if the author is unaware of what he really wants to express.

Western readers prefer and adopt a direct and linear structure manifested by example two. By comparison, we can find that the two examples have exactly opposite information sequence. In example two, the theme has been clearly put forward at the beginning of the essay with three supporting proofs. Last we draw the conclusion. This direct, linear, and concise structure is most welcomed by westerners. The two examples illustrate that there do exist

rhetorical differences (or more exactly, culture-preferred rhetoric) in Chinese and English writings.

## 2.2 Relationship Between Writer and Reader

The relationship between writer and reader is another cause of the preferred rhetorical strategies in Asian and Western cultures. Hinds (1987) makes a distinction between languages that are writer or speaker responsible and those that are reader or hearer responsible. For example, he points out that in English culture, it is the responsibility of the speaker and writer to make the message clear. In certain Asian cultures, such as Chinese culture, it is not the responsibility of the speaker to communicate his message in a clear and direct way. It is the responsibility of the listener or reader to understand what the speaker or writer intends to convey. Although Hinds also maintained that Chinese culture moved from a "reader-responsible" to a "writer-responsible" culture, we shall argue that generally speaking, Chinese in modern period remains a more reader-responsible language than English. Therefore, we can infer that in English culture, the writer thinks that it is his or her onus to express the topic clearly in the beginning of all essays and hence employs a deductive rhetorical strategy. In contrast, in a more reader- responsible culture, the writer puts more responsibility on reader. Usually, the writer does not explicitly tell the reader about the topic statement, for he or she wants the reader to elicit the topic statement by inferring from what has been written in the front part of the essay. Under this circumstance, the inductive rhetorical strategy is most often applied by reader- responsible culture such as Chinese culture.

## 2.3 Objectivity and Credibility in L2 Writing

Generally speaking, Chinese are favor of proverbs and sayings when they intend to persuade readers of the credibility or believability of writing, especially when they feel that they need to strengthen their position by referring to the assumed common knowledge embodied in proverbs. Instead of giving facts or examples, educated Chinese often cite proverbs, maxims, and pieces of folklore to establish their credibility with the reader and demonstrate their familiarity with classical sources. For example,

(a) In China, there is a famous proverb—The most pitiful things are parents' heart.

(b) There is an old saying in Chinese (said by Confucius), "Even when walking in a party of no more than three I can always be certain of learning from those I am with".

(c) As the saying goes "At home one depends upon his parents and outside upon his friends."

Apart from this, western proverbs and sayings are also used by participants. For instance, when asked what death meant to him, he replied, "Death means you can no longer hear Mozart's music."

I'd like to invite Michael Jordon to say what I want to say to you—"Just do it."

Just as the saying goes "Let bygones be bygones."

What's more, Chinese students and western students are also different in using personal pronouns. Here the author only investigated two pronouns: *I* and *we*. Comparatively speaking, the use of *I* is more subjective than that of *we*, since the word *I* is associated with personal feelings. Chinese students are more likely to use the subjective word *I*. The more use of *I* instead of *we* makes our compositions less objective and credible to readers.

From what we say above, we find the main cause lies in the fact that in different rhetoric traditions, the judging criteria for objectivity and credibility are by no means the similar. To a great extent, a certain cultural thought pattern will influence people within this culture especially when they are writing compositions.

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## CONCLUSION

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The author of this paper realizes the effect of culture on language learning and makes efforts to probe the impact of cultural thought patterns on L2 writing. We have made three conclusions: First, Chinese students are more inclined to employ inductive strategy, while western students favor deductive method; Second, Chinese in modern period remains a more reader-responsible writing style than English. Third, owing to different rhetorical traditions, Chinese L2 writing is, in general, less objective and credible. Therefore, the author believes that, to a large extent, cultural thought patterns affect L2 writing.

In a nutshell, cultural thought patterns, which are often ignored by L2 learners and researchers, have great impact upon L2 writing and are of great pedagogical value. Thus,

English teachers should first help students to acquire relevant western cultural thought patterns by providing more theoretical input, introducing the knowledge of western thought patterns, and conducting more guided training in these perspectives; second, teachers should introduce more information about international standards with regard to objectivity and credibility, which is part of requirements for a L2 learner.

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