

Cultural Factors in EAP Teaching -- Influences of Thought Pattern on English Academic Writing

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Abstract

In the last decade, more and more EFL teachers in the universities of China have been aware of the feasibility and necessity of teaching English for Academic Purpose (EAP), which is identified as one type of English for Specific Purposes, to students of non-English majors. Among the EAP courses, academic writing is considered as the most helpful one. More and more scholars of ESP in China have conducted researches on English academic writing (EAW) including analysis on the syntactic characteristics of English for academic purposes, corpus-based study of English dimension adjectives in academic speaking and writing, and comparative study on Natives' EAW and Chinese EAW. It was pointed that the EAW research in China focuses on language form and rules, but neglects the correlation of contents and thoughts. Therefore, this research studies the influences of cultural thought patterns on English academic writing by employing product approach to contrast vocabulary and discourse differences in EAW writings produced by Chinese students and native English students.

Key words: English for academic purpose (EAP); Cultural factors; Thought pattern; English academic writing

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INTRODUCTION

As a main branch of ESP (English for Specific Purposes), EAP (English for Academic Purposes) is defined as the teaching of English "which is concerned with those communicative skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal educational systems" (Jordan, 1997). It seems that the introduction of EAP to China in the early 1980s clarified the purpose of English learning for those non-English majors including university students and scholars. Indeed, many cases proved that English learners from countries, in which English is used for particular situations, are usually well motivated to improve their English skills for the purpose of managing their study or research work. Among the EAP skills, academic writing may be regarded as the most necessary one to be acquired because of the increasing demand for international publishing work. However, English academic writing by Chinese scholars is less competitive internationally for the unreasonable structure, the lack of logic or convergence, or the use of less academic vocabulary. One reason leading to the weakness might be the Chinese thought pattern in writing, which is due to the cultural background. Therefore, this paper will analyze the influences of thought pattern on English academic writing by Chinese EFL learners.

1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

Today people in the world communicate with each other more often, whether in the written or oral form. The culture, particularly the thought pattern, has an apparent effect on the communication. People with different cultural backgrounds use different discourse. When we study a new language, the intrinsic language that we speak will always influence our thought pattern. Concerning the

relationship of language and thought, different theories explain from different aspects. The most influential Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis claims that the way of perceiving the world is determined by the language habitually used. This hypothesis later was referred to as “The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis (LRH)”, which was categorized into two versions by psychologists: the strong version and the weak one. The point of the “strong version” is that language determines thought. While the “weak” one points out that language influence thought. According to Clarire Kramersch (2000) the strong version cannot be taken seriously, but the weak one is generally agreed because of the support from findings of culturally different semantic associations which are evoked by seemingly common concepts.

Piaget believed language and communication depends on thinking (1950). He argued that, only with cognitive development, speech takes on a genuinely communicative function. This suggests that the use of language depends upon the thought or concept, which is developed prior to the acquisition of language in the first stage-sensorimotor stage. In this stage, infants construct an understanding of the world by coordinating experiences (such as seeing and hearing) with physical, motoric actions. On one hand, his theory was supported and developed by groups of researches. For instance, Tomasello and Farrar (1986) studied the comprehension of relational words (“gone”, “down”, “up”) during the development of object permanence, finding that words that indicate change to the object while it is still present (“up”, “down”) were understood before words which relate to absent objects (“gone”). The study suggests the concept must emerge before a child can use the language relating to the concept. Juan Pascual-Leone, as a neo-Piagetian theorist, first explained cognitive growth along Piagetian stages by invoking information processing capacity as the cause of both development from the one stage to the next and individual differences in developmental rate (1970). On the other hand, Piaget theory was also criticized on many grounds. Vygotsky disagreed with Piaget’s theory by arguing that, on the contrary, language is communicative from the beginning, and egocentric speech is an important developmental phenomenon, which helps children to organise and regulate thinking. Whereas, Piaget believed that egocentric speech reflects an inability to take the perspective of others and plays no useful role in development.

In contrast to Piaget’s theory, Vygotsky’s is most often associated with the social constructivist theory. According to him, human development depends on the interactions between people and their social environment, in which cultural tools are involved, mainly language-based. Language is both the most important mental tool and a medium facilitating the acquisition of other mental tools. Since the influences of thought pattern on academic

English writing will be worked on, theoretically this paper will mainly be based on Piaget’s theory.

2. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN THOUGHT PATTERNS

Thought is the process in which the conceptions, judgment and reasoning are used to reflect the objective reality. Thought pattern refers to the mental process of reasoning and problem solving prevalent in a community. (Porter & Samovar, 1995) It might be the deep essence of a culture, and meanwhile, play a dominant role in cultural behaviors of a human. Due to the differences of historical background, social conventions, political system, and educational policies, Chinese thought pattern differs from western thought pattern in many ways.

Chinese prefer to think from an integrated aspect that every thing is related. While, western thought pattern prefer to divide an integrate object into different parts. The Chinese integrated way of thinking is called synthetic thought, which emphasizes the integrity and unity of the human society and nature. Western analytic pattern emphasizes observation and experiment by commencing from the part to the whole. Furthermore, Chinese attach importance to the intuition in consciousness, and imagery thought pattern is better preferred than logical thought in China. On the contrary, western thought is more abstract by emphasizing the use of logical and rational way to describe specific things. Therefore, the western objective thought pattern was formed, which is also the core rule of scientific observation and experiments. Whereas, Chinese thought pattern is more subjective, indicating the human-centered culture that man, as the subject of cognition, is the center of the universe and the measure of all things on the earth (Pan, 2002). Additionally, Chinese thought pattern is circular. In contrast, western pattern is linear.

In sum, western thought pattern carries the characteristics of being analytic, abstract, objective, conceptualized, ego-centric, systematic and linear. In contrast, Chinese thought pattern is more synthetic, imagery, subjective, group-oriented, non-systematic and cyclical.

3. THE INFLUENCES OF DIFFERENT THOUGHT PATTERNS ON ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING

English Academic Writing (EAW) differs from other genres of writings about the figures, literature, journalism or business mainly in the specific readers, content, tone and purpose (Oshima, 1991). Since it is a unique type of writing, in addition to some language issues, logic, objectivity, professionalism, purposefulness, structure and expressiveness all need to be considered by an academic

writer. In China, writing an academic paper in English is a rather demanding task for university students and scholars for the lack of understanding to the above mentioned features under the influence of thought pattern. With the traditional Chinese cultural background, when writing in foreign languages, it is quite natural for writers to express by thinking in mother language, which embodies the cultural differences existing in thought pattern from the levels of diction to the level of discourse pattern. Therefore, an English academic article may be perfect in grammar and yet somehow cannot be accepted by native readers. Generally, the influences of thought pattern on EAW can be explained from the aspects of wording, syntactic structure and text structure.

English learners are strongly recommended to learn the features of academic language. Concerning vocabulary, regardless of subject areas, it is also characterized by a level of formality, complexity, precision and accuracy. The words used to communicate information and ideas in academic texts are different from words in everyday conversations, newspapers or novels. Firstly, one feature found in Chinese English writing is the frequent use of personal pronouns, particularly the first-person pronouns "we". This can be possibly attributed to Chinese group-oriented thinking. In contrast, English native speakers prefer to think in a more ego-centric way, so "I" will be used instead of "we". In fact, in English academic writing, the use of personal references should be avoided in order to strengthen the objectivity and credibility in argumentation or explanation. However, Chinese would employ personal references probably because of the traditional ideology that it is human being who is the center of the cosmos and conducts the actions. This thought pattern can also be reflected by the animate subject sentence in Chinese writing which is contrary to passive sentences in native speakers' writings owing to western's objective thinking pattern. Another noted feature in Chinese learners' English academic writing is the use of verb and verb phrases instead of nouns and nominal groups, which is probably affected by intuitive, specific and imaginary Chinese thinking pattern. However, in English academic writing, higher level of abstraction, as a representation of formality, is preferred and can be realized by changing verbs and adjectives into nouns or extended noun groups. It could be said that the more abstract and objective western thought pattern determines the feature of nominalization.

Western thinking focuses on the illustration of the object and the process. Therefore, in English academic writing, human agents are usually omitted through the employment of passive sentence pattern, existential sentence, or subjective clause leading by formative subject "It". However, Chinese thought pattern which emphasizes the subject of an action determines the frequent use of active sentence pattern. Additionally, parataxis is another

distinctive feature of Chinese language, which is a reflection of Chinese synthetic thought. Consequently, being influenced by this thinking pattern, the use of coherent devices in Chinese students' writing is not as abundant as in native speakers' writing. Western thinking values hypotaxis, logic and analysis. So, the logical arrangement of sentences is usually realized by the use of transitional devices such as conjunctive adverbs or adverbial conjunctions. Besides, substitution and ellipsis are employed to help with the coherence and cohesiveness of sentences.

In academic writing, western modes of thinking tend to express straightforward personal views, so English paragraph tends to bring out the theme directly and clearly at the beginning of discourse. Contrarily, Chinese traditional thinking emphasizes that everything mutually reinforces. This usually leads to the beginning of discourse that often starts from very far periphery. Furthermore, Chinese synthetic thought pattern determines the correlative discourse pattern, and western analytic thought pattern brings the detached English pattern.

In Chinese cultural setup, the most preferred method of thinking is usually deductive and not inductive as in the west. This difference has been found to have profound implications for teaching English to Chinese student for academic purposes. Deductive thinking uses logic which reasons "downwards", in order to derive proposals; because these comprises of no new information, they are usually defined to be true. On the contrary, induction thinking normally has a starting point that is empirically verifiable statistics of facts; it actually uses "upwards" in order to produce a conclusion which is then regarded as tentative because more facts may become available. The implication of the above differences in learning English for academic purpose occurs when Chinese student places background information first, and the main point later; this is done on the basis of the belief that the main point cannot be understood without the necessary background. This actually tends to frustrate or confuse tutors (Institute for Advanced Chinese Studies, 1957).

In Chinese cultural setup students normally tend to overuse metaphors in their English essay writings. Chinese believe that the more metaphors there are in the script, the more effective and convincing the script is. Furthermore, Chinese learners believe that the use of metaphor allows the reader to get more than one meaning from the statement thus rendering the latter to be more convincing. On the contrary, in the western writing culture metaphors are usually sparingly used because they are generally thought to confuse and blur the meaning, especially when used in academic writings.

Another two factors leads to less creativity in Chinese academic English writing is their reliance on memorization and dependency on their instructors. Various studies and researches uphold that most Chinese students rely heavily

on memorization, which is a result of application of the same methodology when they were learning their first, native language. In order for one to learn Chinese, an individual must use memorization skills, which are the learning skills that they draw on in their later learning. This culturally constructed way of learning significantly affects Chinese students' learning English for academic purposes, more importantly because this methodology of learning is generally incompatible when used in learning English. The Chinese cultural context views memorization as a concession to collected familiarities of the past and to the authority of others. This methodology is usually detrimental in cultivating understanding and analysis to the Chinese learning English for academic purpose (Heisey, 2000). Furthermore, in the western education setup, instructors tend to implement critical thinking and dialogue into classrooms and students are usually expected to conduct their own reading and extensive reading, but in the Chinese classroom the instructor is the one who usually plays a crucial role in the learning process. The implication of Chinese learning setup is that it encourages student-instructor dependency.

4. WRITE FROM CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Culture is the umbrella which shelters all the patterns of our social activities and has serious influences not only on one's communication, behavior or affiliation but it goes further by determining the thought pattern exhibited by an individual. Some explanations by anthropologists have defined culture as the system of life that people live. It is the amount of all their learned behavior, attitudes, outlook and mental things. Culture has also been defined as not being innate, but learned. People learn it and share amongst themselves. Since it is shared by many people, culture tends to affect the way people respond to various forces of nature and consequently affects their thinking pattern. All kinds of culture have got their own distinctive system, due to their differences; their value organization and worldview also have, unlike characters. The western and oriental cultures are two typical cultures in the world. In communication and thinking system of Chinese pattern, the two cultures always collide with each other. The traditional or native Chinese hold the view of oneness between nature and man while the westerners believe in the division between nature and man. The two diverse worldviews have a significant purpose in the foundation of the thought pattern of the native Chinese and western people (Gu, 2012).

English writing and Chinese writing take different features of expression and custom in organization and syntactic structure. A thought, which is feedback of the human brain toward objective reality, also is the intellectual activity created by social practice. Social is an image of the tendency of linguistic and notice through

the eras and personifies the characteristics of thought of countries. There is no doubt that English language and Chinese language have their own thought and cultural (Adamson, 2004).

The basis of writing is what we think. It is unavoidable that language and thought pattern are predisposed by each other. Language, culture and thought pattern are interactive about the differences phenomena. Language is influenced by thinking patterns and cultural as well as construes the reality of culture and thinking. The variances are replicated on the method, not the spirit of the thinking. It thus shows that when we understand another language, we should recognize its thinking patterns and culture altogether.

The perception that cultural values reinforce the thinking and the acting of the people, and their way of informing ideas and practice is not new in the Chinese context, especially in the learning of English for academic purpose in the entire Asia. Many studies suggest that there are generally differences between cultures in areas such as learning, social interaction and sense of self-relations to others. These cultural characteristics normally influence Chinese students' approach to learning English for academic purpose. In most cases it is normally tempting to place Chinese learners on one side of the binary division, and western learners on the other side, this actually oversimplifies the picture. It is usually beneficial to consider all learners as being on a continuum in relations to their cultural characteristics as well as their writing elegances and methodologies to the learning and classroom interaction in EAP.

In general speaking, the linear and the analytical system are the feature of the western thought pattern as well as the English. They write in the discourse according to this pattern, and they used to place the topic to the beginning. This has to some extent influenced the Chinese thinking pattern. The process of coming up with the conclusion is imperative. The Chinese stress the parataxis in the discourse construction. The association in the discourse isn't as strict as in the English. All these variances are caused due to the diverse thinking patterns.

In describing the writing and interaction approaches to the learning adopted by the Chinese learners, it is normally viewed to involve collectivism/individualism, questioning/respectfulness and analyzing/memorizing. The Chinese societies are believed to be largely influenced by Confucian teachings, typically referred to as a Confucian heritage cultures. The writing and social interaction of Chinese is classically perceived to be unlike to those of the west. The description of this learning culture carries with it an implication of inferiority. Learners in Confucian heritage culture perspectives are said not to question, not act independently, not reflect and not organize their ideas in a linear and logical manner. In respect to this, they are said to differ from western student especially when

learning under the west educational environment.

Writing is an activity that is normally embedded in culture, and it actually sets rules and patterns that are typically shared by a given community. Chinese English learners' way of writing texts is essentially culturally and linguistically bound. Chinese writings largely are found to appeal heavily to tradition, history, religion and lacks coherence to the western bibliophile due to the fact that arguments in this text are normally delayed. Furthermore, Chinese English is typically found to avoid expressing the point of view directly, but rather they clearly express a point of view that is too individualistic (Minford & Lau, 2000). All these features are typically identified as being part of distinctive Chinese writing culture flairs and are conceivably transferred across to English writings. This clearly indicates that Chinese writing styles has noticeably rhetorical pattern that is different from English. These patterns actually end up being transferred to written English by Chinese English learners' for academic purpose.

CONCLUSION

Based on the contrastive analysis of the two thinking patterns and the influences of thinking patterns on English academic writing, this study concludes that culture awareness is necessary to language learning and the understanding of Chinese and western thinking patterns will be contributive to the development of academic writing skill. The western culture stresses the analytic and logic thinking pattern. It emphasizes the individualist and dividedness between the man and nature. Their way of thinking is liner. Therefore, the English structure is also developed in a liner way. The traditional Chinese culture stresses the entirety. It is a parataxis of thought pattern which pursues the harmoniousness between subjective and objective so that the Chinese is a topic-prominent construction language. Techniques of writing from the cultural perspective and writing from linguistic

perspective are the two sides of one coin, which both the base of a good writing. In China, the teaching of academic English writing skills should be no longer focused on the forms and rules. Instead, the analysis on culture and thinking patterns should be introduced.

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