

# The Frustration of Chinese ESL Learners in English Writing from Cross-Cultural Perspective

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**Keywords:** Cultural differences, English writing, Cross-cultural communication

**Abstract:** This paper attempts to explore Chinese English learners’ frustration in a cross-cultural perspective. It argues that developing cultural awareness is a necessity in English writing instruction to Chinese English learners. Firstly, it discusses that culture plays an important role in second language writing; then it illustrates the culture-induced differences between English writing and Chinese writing that Chinese English learners often confront when writing in English; finally, it suggests the cultural differences in writing be bridged by developing learners’ cultural awareness. The teachers should train the students to know our culture that is well-established, meanwhile, introduce the related country’s culture by the teaching material, then enable the students to have a three-dimensional sensation to the foreign land culture.

## 1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the causes of the frustration of Chinese ESL writers in a cross-cultural perspective. Firstly, it discusses why culture plays an important role in second language writing, from some descriptions, it can be seen that both Chinese English Learners and their foreign instructors are not satisfied; then, it illustrates the culture-induced differences between English writing and Chinese Writing that Chinese English learners often confront; finally, it suggests the culture-induced differences in writing be bridged by developing learners’ cultural awareness [1].

## 2. Frustration of Chinese Learners in English Writing

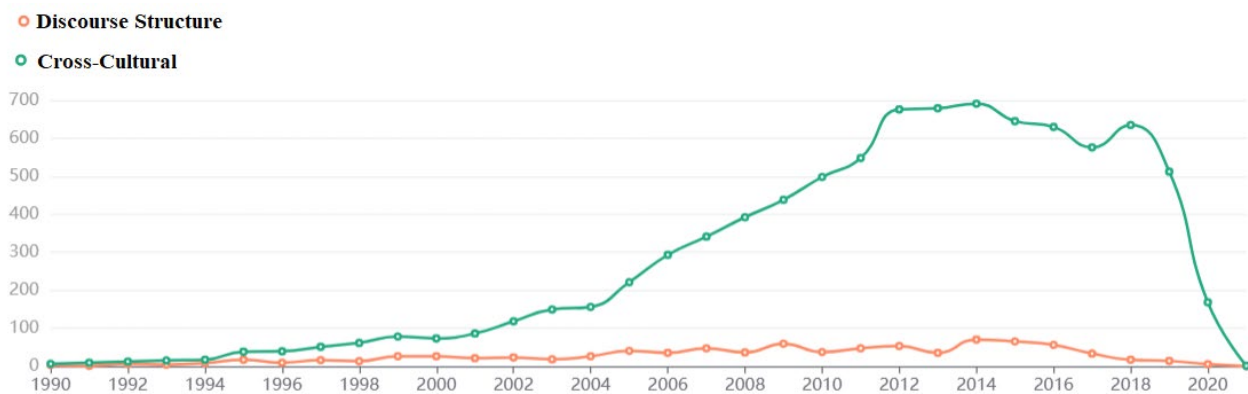


Fig.1 Cross-Cultural Topics Appear in the Exam

Compared with speech, writing is a highly specialized type of communicative competence, which requires a number of things: a high degree of organization in the development of ideas and information; a high degree of accuracy so that there is no ambiguity of meaning; the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis; and a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and the eventual readers. It is these demands that present particular problems to foreign writers of English.

Many learners and teachers would recognize the characterization of writing periods as times of sighting, pencil-chewing and foot-shuffling agony. And Chinese English learners are of no exception. Chinese English learners often operate under pressure and experiences high level of frustration in English writing. As shown in Fig. 1.

## **2.1 Chinese Degree-Seeking Graduates in Foreign Universities**

All degree-seeking graduates in foreign Universities are required to demonstrate proficiency in written English. The universities hope that this requirement will function as “...a means of ensuring that people awarded advanced degrees have sufficient competence in English to communicate fluently, appropriately, and effectively, not only while they are students but afterwards in business and professional communities”. Most of students abroad are scared to death to write in English, or more accurately, they are scared to death that they will not write in English well enough to pass their examination and then be able to move on in their academic work towards a university degree is why they are there. This is also the case for Chinese English students abroad. They have studied English for years. They memorize a lot of words and grammar rules. However, they still find that to write in English is not an easy job[2].

## **2.2 English Learners At Chinese Universities**

The writing of English students at Chinese Universities is also not satisfactory, since writing was included in the CET by Chinese Education Committee in 1987, the average score of writing part has always been between 5 and 7 out of total 15. Comprehensive communicative competence is becoming more and more important for Chinese students. In classes, teachers should not only teach students the four skills of listening, speaking. Reading and writing, but also provide them the appropriate cultural context to use them. So how to improve students' comprehensive communicative competence in class is the main task for English teachers in China. At present, some problems still exist in college English teaching in China. Traditional teaching models always attach much attention to students' English grammar and ignore their practical communication competence. This thesis will expound a multilayered model of teaching reading which can be used to foster this competence for the teaching of reading in EFL class in China is by far the most important course for English learners in colleges and universities.

## **3. The Causes in a Cross-Cultural Perspective**

What is the cause of Chinese English learners' frustration? Why are Chinese learners famous for their incompetence in English writing? In fact, more and more attention is being paid to writing. Learners spend much time and energy on writing. The writing in second language should be understood and accepted by native speakers. But language and writing are both cultural phenomena. Culture plays an important role in second language writing. Different languages and culture set different requirements for readability[3].Therefore, it is not surprising that there are many culture-induced differences interfere with Chinese learners' English writing. They prevent Chinese English learners' frustration in English writing.

### **3.1 Culture and Second Language Writing**

Does culture have anything to do with second language writing? Yes, simply because language is a part of culture, is interfered with culture, and language learning, at the same time, is culture learning.

#### **3.1.1 Culture and Language**

“Culture consists of all the shared products of human society”. This means not only such material things as cities, organizations and schools, but also non-material things such as ideas, customs, family patterns, and languages. Language symbolizes cultural reality. Language is a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value. Speakers identify themselves and others through their use of

language; they view their language as a symbol of their social identity. Therefore, it cannot be denied that language and culture are profoundly connected. Language is a part of culture, and that it plays a very important role in it. Without language, culture would not be possible. Language simultaneously reflects culture, and is influenced and shaped by it. In a word, language and culture are inseparable.

### 3.1.2 Culture and Second Language Writing

Considering the necessity of cross-cultural learning, some language instructors suggest that the knowledge of culture be the fifth skill for language learners in addition to listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The proceeding discussion has demonstrated that learning to write in a second language is much more than just a technical achievement in orthography vocabulary. Furthermore, becoming a proficient writer in a second language requires assimilation of far more subtle and yet pervasive cultural knowledge about ways of arguing, ways of addressing an audience, ways of expressing authority, and much more. Therefore, writing teachers to non-native speakers, as well as learners, should be sensitive culture-induced differences manifested in any aspect of writing[4].

### 3.2 Cultural-Induced Differences Confronted by Chinese English Writers

Chinese is an Eastern country while English-speaking countries are mostly grouped into the Western world. Due to historical, political, religious reasons, they represent different cultures. And cultural differences also exist in aspects of writing. These differences interfere with Chinese learners' English writing. As shown in Table 1:

Table 1 Case Study Of Intercultural Communication in College English

White Dress
Case analysis: The Indian women might think the wedding ceremony is a funeral if they see the western bride in white gown. The case reflects the similes and metaphors in the text.
Coconut-skating
Case analysis: The case reflects the characteristics of culture. We can tell from the case that culture is pervasive and it's learned. People may invent different ways for things even as simple as the issue of floor moping.

#### 3.2.1 Culture-Induced Differences in Writing Norms

Researchers have come to recognize that the structure of written texts and rhetorical Paradigms are based on cultural frameworks, derived from different stylistic, religious, ethical, and social notions, all of which comprise written discourse conventions. The most examined and best-documented aspect of culture in ESL writing pedagogy pertains to norms for writing and how these norms are manifested in the linguistic. Chinese and English present differences in the purpose of writing. Due to differences in this aspect, Chinese and English set different standards for good writing. Before the comparison is made, the side of English is briefly introduced. In Anglo-American culture, the purpose of writing is usually associated with promulgation or acquisition of knowledge. Therefore, good writing should at least have following characteristics, unity, coherence, clarity. On the contrary, Chinese people think that a major purpose of writing is to show mastery of the established forms, to demonstrate knowledge of literary tradition, and the more important, to display artistic ability. To be artistic means how well they can manipulate the language, that is, their ability to use set phrases and idioms, to quote metaphors and imagery from classic literature, and to make use of beautiful language[5].

#### 3.2.2 Culture-Induced Differences in words' Connotations

“Careful with fire, is good advice. We know;  
Careful with words, is ten times doubly so;”  
--Will Carleton, the First Settler's Story

Words are the building blocks of compositions. It is difficult to find a proper word to express the meaning that the speaker or writer wants to convey. It is more difficult for a second language learner. When second language learners write in the target language, they often make use of the native language while thinking. But when second language learners write in such a way, a problem appears.

Learners have to find an exact word or expression in the target language to substitute their thinking words or expression in the native language. Most learners will recognize it not an easy job to do this substitution, for words or terms in one language do not have the same meaning when translated into another language. Sometimes, one word in the native language seems to have an equivalent in the target language. In fact, they are different, for they carry different cultural connotations. It is inevitable that the cultural difference has impact on some aspects. In addition, the meanings of some animal words are also determined by culture. Many English and Chinese culturally-loaded animal words differ in meaning owing to different cultural content, cultural tradition and cultural psychology, and the differences are likely to invoke errors in expression[6].

#### **4. The Impact of Cultural Differences on Intercultural Communication**

The Essential Differences of the Sino-occidental Religions and the View of Value in some extent decided the Western society's characteristic and the historical trend. In addition, Non-verbal communication is also an indispensable part of human communication. It is an important way to exchange ideas, too.

##### **4.1 Religion, the View of Value**

He Chinese religion is the human religion, while the Western religion is the theology religion. So Chinese Confucianism is a religious system that taking the human as the central and Christianity is taking the god as the central. The differences of their cultures always prevent understanding in the Cross-Culture communication. In the Cross-Culture communication process, the view of values are not avoided in the cultural, people understand the values difference, then deepened to understand the Cross-Culture communicating. This is because, when the problems come to the Cross-Culture communication, it is the time that different values have been conflicted. So William assume that there is a significant possibility that the view of values differences are causing communication problems, Therefore, the values constituted the base of the culture and the society. The values are an abstract concept, and people hardly grasp it, but through the language or the non-language behavior pattern, we can know the values of some culture[7].

##### **4.2 Non-Verbal Communication and Social Psychology**

Non-verbal communication is an important topic in the Cross-Culture communication. It refers that people use the non-verbal activity to express and understand their information in the specific scene or the linguistic environment. If anyone asked you what the main means of communication between people were, what would you say? That isn't catch question. The answer is simple and obvious. It would almost certainly refer to means of communication that involve the use of words. Speakers and listeners - oral communication, and writers and readers - have written communication. And you'd be quite right. There is, however, another form of communication which we all use most of the time, usually without knowing it[8]. This is sometimes called body language. Its more technical name is non-verbal communication. Nonverbal, because it does not involve the use of words. NVC for short. When someone is saying something with which he agrees, the average European will smile and nod approval. On the other hand, if you disagree with what they are saying, you may frown and shake your head. In this way you signal your reactions, and communicate them to the speaker without saying a word. I referred a moment ago to "the average European", because body language is very much tied to culture, and in order not to misunderstand, or not to be misunderstood, you must realize this. A smiling Chinese, for instance, may not be approving but somewhat embarrassed.

#### **5. Summary**

As far as writing is concerned, teachers are duty-bound to enable their students to put an idea into the kind of English that a native speaker of English can readily understand. Basing on the previous parts, it is safe to say that cultural considerations play an important role in the development of

Chinese ESL learners' such writing competence. Then the question arises germane to the discussion, how can writing teachers help learners bridge the culture-induced differences? They may develop learners' cultural awareness in writing classes by providing typical reading materials to illustrate differences and by contextualizing writing tasks for learners to practice what they have learned about English writing[9].

Chinese and English are poles apart. Writing is to express your thought through language. We have to key elements: language and thought. For a successful writing activity to happen, both are necessary. Writing in English is very different from writing in Chinese and writing well in English is a skill that must be learned. Many of the differences between Chinese and Western writing are rooted in the differences in the two cultures. Therefore, besides the linguistic interference, cultural factors pose problems for Chinese English writers, e.g. different cultural attitudes toward writing; different preferred rhetorical patterns which are determined by social or cultural conventions. Chinese ESL learners ought to know how English operates in order to communicate appropriately and effectively in their English writing. Teachers must ensure that effective in-class training programs are provided for Chinese ESL learners, so that they become more familiar with the English language, and other country's culture [10]. In addition, Chinese ESL learners need to be made aware of the differing cultural values, particularly the different forms of non-verbal communication used by other cultures. Above all, in order to minimize communication problems and to improve their English writing, understanding and cooperation in the English communication, students need to have an effective knowledge about their courses, and to have the communication skills to develop confidence and self-esteem among diverse English learners. However, further studies to identify potential problems and solution, as well as better training in cross cultural communication for Chinese ESL learners, should result in a much more understanding and cooperative environment.

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