

# Appraisal Patterns in Chinese EFL Argumentative Essays

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**Abstract**—Using the resources in Appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005), this paper contrastively examines a total of 124 Chinese undergraduate EFL argumentative essays in two dimensions: how two different essay topics initiate different evaluative patterns in EFL and L1 essays; what distinguishes EFL from L1 writers' evaluative language in argumentative essays. The corpus-based study reveals that though native and non-native writers display similar appraisal pattern in dealing with different essay topics, native speakers use more negative evaluative language to bring out potential contradictory points. The study suggests that EFL learners' deficiency in lexical proficiency, especially of those expressing negative and polarizing meanings may hinder their capacity in critical thinking involved in argumentative writing tasks. With effective teaching strategies, the enhancement of the lexical proficiency of evaluative language can boost EFL students' persuasive writing ability and their overall writing capacity.

**Index Terms**—appraisal, EFL argumentative writing, corpus, negative, lexical proficiency

## I. INTRODUCTION

Research on evaluative language started in the late 1960s and has since attracted more attention from diversified scholars. They recognized evaluative items from different perspectives and frameworks, such as the 'evaluation' in narratives (Labov, 1972), 'evidentiality' in (Chafe & Nichols, 1986) and 'stance' across different registers (Biber, 1986; Biber *et al.*, 1989). In recent years with the swell of interest in corpus linguistics, there is a growing trend for annotating and abstracting such subjective or inter-subjective elements in corpus. Hyland (2004), based on a corpus of 160 book reviews across different disciplines, found that all academic genres are evaluative, especially book reviews, of which the book reviewer's evaluative language (praise and criticism) has a strong influence on the reputation of the book writer. This shows that the use of evaluative language plays a significant role in acknowledging the writer's subjective stance and sentimental states. Wiebe *et al.* (2005) clustered opinions, beliefs, feelings, evaluations and judgments under a general concept of private states, which are annotated in text according to three types of private state expressions, explicit mentions of private states, speech events expressing private states and expressive subjective elements.

However, the most systemic framework of evaluative language so far is the one established by Martin *et al.* (Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin & White, 2005). This functional approach operates in three correlative domains: Attitude, Engagement and Graduation. And each category has its axes of values and dimensions of appraising items.

The purpose of the current paper is to use the above theoretical framework (Martin & White, 2005) to analyze the evaluative language in Chinese EFL essays. The focus of the study is on argumentative writing, for two reasons. First, this genre of writing has been the major writing task on China's College English level tests for both English major and non-major students. Second, argumentative writing requires the writer to take a position in discussing the issue given in the writing task prompt, and so the opinion-oriented essays are expected to be overtly marked with evaluative lexical items. As such, writings of this type reflect not only students' use of evaluative language but their critical way of thinking. One of the challenges that EFL writing teaching faces is how to balance the 'deep approach' and the 'surface approach' (Ramsden, 2003; Hood, 2004). The former is more focused on structural and lexical usages and the latter concerns with reasoning and critical analysis. Therefore, how these two approaches could be better incorporated is also contained in the purpose of the current study.

The present study investigates two main problems: first, how different essay topics initiate different evaluative patterns in EFL and L1 essays; second, what distinguishes EFL from L1 language users' evaluative language in argumentative essays.

## II. THE APPRAISAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is conducted within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). This theory considers language to have three basic metafunctions: ideational (our experience of the world), interpersonal (our social relationships), and textual (text production and reception) metafunctions (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004). Our study deals with a key aspect of interpersonal function of language, which is the evaluative function of language. In this domain, the theory of Appraisal is concerned with how language users negotiate and express their inter-subjective positions in discourse. Martin and White (2005, pp.34-38) divides Appraisal into three subsystems: Attitude,

Engagement and Graduation. Among them, Attitude is about “our feelings, including emotional reactions, judgments of behaviour and evaluation of things” (Martin & White, 2005, p.35) and it is further divided into three categories--Affect, Judgment and Appreciation.

The dimension of Appreciation has to do with the attitudes about ‘things’ as apposed to ‘human beings’. It has two types, positive and negative. Since lexical items, such as *formal*, *new* and *old* display no obvious positive or negative value by itself, but depend on their surrounding lexical environment, the present study annotates words as such “neutral”.

The domain of Affect construes emotions, feelings, and has positive and negative types. Similarly, Judgment pertains to the attitudes toward human actions, behaviours or characters and it is subdivided into ‘social esteem’ and ‘social sanction’. These two systems are endowed with positive and negative values as well.

Engagement concerns how the evaluator indicates and the interpreters identify the relationship between the evaluator and the addressees in discourse. It operates from the dialogistic perspective, which has two subcategories: Contraction and Expansion. Under Contraction, proclaim and disclaim are subtypes; under Expansion, entertain and attribute are subtypes.

Graduation describes the measurement of Attitudinal or Engagement values through Force and category boundaries through Focus. The domain of Force is a means of grading Attitudes in two sub-domains, quantification and intensification. The items of Focus “sharpen or soften” evaluative attitudes (Martin & Rose, 2005, p.138). Focus in narrative genre display significantly different patterns in native and non-native spoken discourse. Since the present study targets argumentative written text, Focus is not much of our concern here.

The network of Appraisal is illustrated in the Appendix, along with the annotation schema employed in the current research. What is especially distinguished in the annotation of evaluative markers in the data is the differentiation of positive and negative values for the domain of Attitude, in which Affect, Judgment and Appreciation appraising terms are tagged differently as positive (Pos) or negative (Neg).

### III. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

#### A. *The Problem*

The essays collected in the study were composed for the following two prompts, A and B as follows:

Prompt A (Education): *Some people simply see education as going to schools or colleges, or as a means to secure good jobs; most people view education as a lifelong process. In your opinion, how important is education to modern man?*

Prompt B (Internet): *Some people say that the Internet provides people with a lot of information and convenience. Others think that too much information creates problems and brings potential troubles. What is your opinion?*

The two prompts above seem to imply different orientations. In particular, prompt A, about education, seem to link education to either ensuring job security or self-improvement; neither carries negative coloring. Prompt B, about the internet, however, implicates two sides of the modern technology, one being positive and the other, negative. This may lead us to ask: do native and non-native speakers handle these two prompts differently based on the implication?

The raw data is classified based on two parameters: writer type (native, non-native) and essay topic (Education, Internet).

#### B. *Data Collection and Annotation*

The essays written by Chinese students were extracted from WECCL (sub-corpus of Spoken and Written English Corpus of Chinese Learners), a corpus of 3,880 essays (1255, 347 tokens) written by EFL English majors (year 1-4) on 16 topics. The essays of native speakers written for the two prompts (Education and Internet) came from NESSIE (Native English Speakers' Similarly-and Identically-promoted Essays), which has a collection of 525 (12,000 words) essays.

The coding tool used in the study is BFSU Qualitative Coder 1.1 and the annotation is semi-automatically conducted based on the coding scheme in the Appendix. A total of 140 essays were coded with appraising annotations, of which 124 were written by third- and fourth-year Chinese college students, and 16 by native speakers. The limited number of native speakers' data is due to the fact that though NESSIE has a collection of over 500 essays by native students, the writings cover a wide range of topics. To make parallel comparison between native and non-native writings, this unbalanced proportion was taken into consideration through calculation on the scale of log-likelihood. As shown in table I, the coding produced more than 10,000 appraisal tags distributed differently in the 140 essays as follows.

TABLE I.  
DISTRIBUTION OF APPRAISAL ANNOTATIONS

Essay Topic	Text Type	Number of Essays	Word count	Annotated Instances	Word Count per Essay	Annotated Instances per Essay
Education	Chinese (Y3, Y4)	63	19,412	4,150	308	<b>65.87</b>
	Native	11	5,126	1,103	466	<b>100.27</b>
Internet	Chinese (Y3, Y4)	61	19,900	4,054	326	66.46
	Native	5	4,840	810	968	162
		140	49278	10,117	/	/

As indicated in table I, the average number of appraising items annotated in the essays is around 65 in Chinese, and 100-160 in native texts; the latter is higher because native speakers on average produced essays longer than required and also longer than non-native speakers'. For both types of essays, a sentence, on average, has around 3-4 annotated items in the test data.

#### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

##### A. Distribution of Appraisal Patterns in EFL and L1 Essays on Two Subjects

Since the two essay topics are presumed to involve different focuses. The topic on education might invoke more positive elaboration while the one on the Internet may lead to more contradictory points. The annotated result is shown in table II.

TABLE II  
SIGNIFICANT APPRAISAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN EFL ESSAYS ON TWO SUBJECTS

Annotation	Education	Internet	Log-likelihood ratio	Significance	
PosApp	800	653	18.77	0.000	+
PosSanc	90	54	10.01	0.002	+
PosEst	82	32	26.40	0.000	+
Intens	630	774	11.44	0.001	-
Quant	806	981	13.10	0.000	-

As seen in table II, the essays on education do demonstrate more positive evaluative markers than those on the effect of the internet. In particular, the use of positive Social Esteem (PosEst, LLR= 26.4,  $p<0.01$ ), positive Appreciation (PosApp, LLR=18.77,  $p<0.01$ ), and positive Social Sanction (PosSanc, LLR=18.77,  $p<0.05$ ) are all significantly more frequent than those on the topic of Internet. Yet the instances of Quantification and Intensification are prominently high in the elaboration on the Internet. Fig.1 clearly shows this pattern of difference.

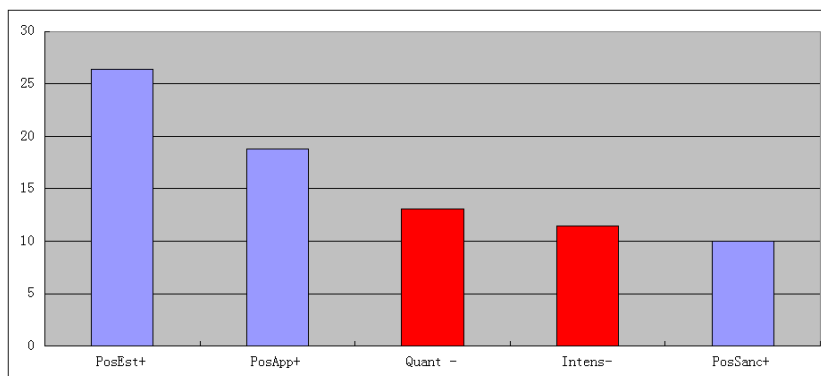


Figure 1. Significant appraisal distinction between EFL essays of two subjects

The result in Fig. 1 reflects the phenomena that as apposed to the Internet, students generally display a more obvious confirming attitude to education being a lifelong process. And that might explain why they use more positive terms for appreciating (annotated as PosApp) the role that education plays in their life. Also, the topic of education seems to involve more comments concerning people's esteem and sanction and that explains why the two domains of Judgment are both positively valued. The topic of the Internet, on the other hand, is considered to be more about social and technology development and so the system of Judgment is instantiated comparatively lower.

The second point worth mentioning is the frequency of the two variables in Graduation, Quantification and Intensification. Non-native speakers seem to use more Graduation terms in discussing the effect of the internet than education. This might have to do with the fact that when emphasizing the advantages of the development in technology, they tend to use more strengthening terms like *a lot*, *very much* and so on.

Quite Similarly, native speakers demonstrate an identical pattern in their argumentative essays to the EFL learners' essays as indicated in table III. In particular, the items marking positive Affect (LLR=24,  $p<0.01$ ), positive Social Esteem (LLR= 23.88,  $p<0.01$ ), and positive Appreciation (LLR=5.56,  $p<0.05$ ) in essays on education are all significantly more frequent than those about the Internet.

TABLE III.  
SIGNIFICANT APPRAISAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN L1 ESSAYS ON TWO SUBJECTS

	Education	Internet	Log-likelihood	significance	
PosAff	47	10	24.00	0.000	+
PosApp	190	138	5.56	0.018	+
PosEst	49	11	23.88	0.000	+
Intens	176	102	15.92	0.000	+
Quant	188	128	8.28	0.004	+

Fig. 2 illustrates the distinction in a more straightforward way, in which prominently high frequencies of Attitude and Judgment appraisal terms are found in evaluating the role of education, while at the same time, the two types of Graduation (Intensification and Quantification) are used more often in essays about education than those about the effect of Internet; this is different from what is found in non-native speakers’ data where Graduation appraising items are found more in essays about the internet as discussed above. This seems to suggest that when native speakers evaluate the role of education in a more positive term, they also highlight the role that education plays in one’s life through using terms of Quantification and Intensification. In other words, they weigh the positive role of education much more than that of the internet. Chinese students’ essays, however, show that they acknowledge the positive role of education, yet not so much as native speakers do, or at least not show its parallel weight in the lexis.

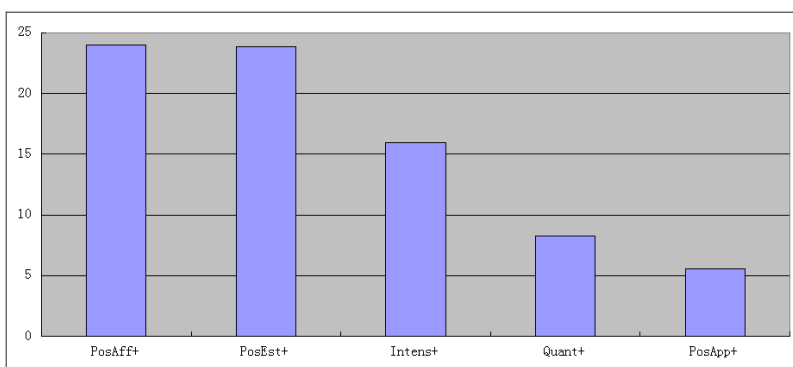


Figure 2. Significant appraisal contrast of EFL against L1 essays of two subjects

Based on tables II, III and Fig. 1, 2, a general pattern can be found that both native and non-native speakers use similar appraising patterns at least in the way they use positive terms when evaluating the role of education playing in people’s work and life than about the effect of the Internet. This might correspond to the point made in Hyland (2004) that “praise” is quite global while “criticism” needs more contextual features. However, under this global praising attitude toward education, more distinctive patterns are revealed when we compare how EFL and L1 speakers deal with the same subject of essay.

B. Comparison of Appraisal Patterns in EFL and L1 Essays on Two Subjects

When comparing the appraisal patterns in native and non-native writings for Prompt A, about the role of education, things become more interesting. As illustrated in Fig. 3, Chinese college students seem to employ significantly fewer elements of evaluation about education in almost all the appraisal domains as compared with their native counterparts.

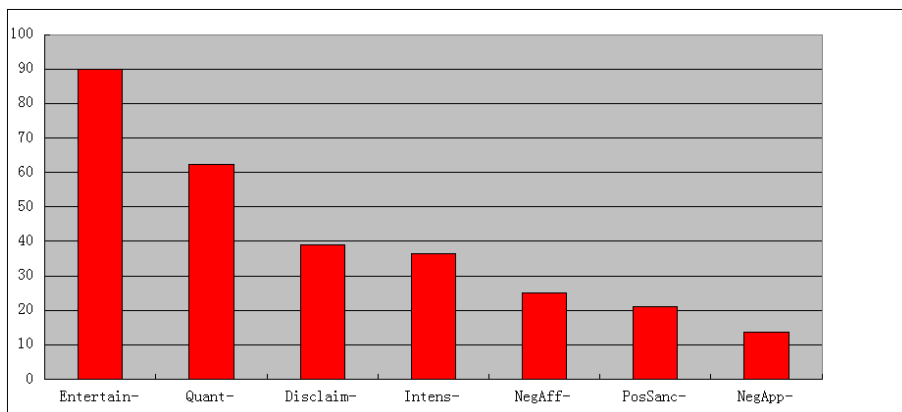


Figure 3. Significant appraisal contrast of EFL against L1 essays about Education

What seems to be reflected in the result in Fig. 3 leads to two assumptions. First, as discussed above, native and non-native speakers seem to employ similar strategies in confirming the positive role that education plays in people’s life. Yet, as shown in Fig. 3, even standing in the identical argumentative position, Chinese college students seem to be

poorly armed with no sufficient evaluative “weapons” to defend their points. In other words, as Prompt A implies a positive theme surrounding the role of education, Chinese students would merely focus on the positive side of education, without setting up possible counter-arguments, initiating evaluating items in Disclaim, negative Affect, negative Appreciation or entertain potential oppositions. Another possible reason is that the insufficiency of lexical proficiency may have very much weakened their argumentative potency and may sometimes make them hard to substantiate their position and eventually blur the point they intend to make in essays.

As compared with Prompt A, the topic about the internet, seems to suggest contradiction by pointing out both the positive and the negative role of the modern technology; therefore, we may expect non-native speakers to invoke more negative-coloring evaluative items than that about education. And if not more, they would demonstrate a similar evaluative pattern with native speakers.

Fig. 4 shows that as compared with native speakers, Chinese students use more positive and confirming markers in Affect and Proclaim. At the same time, the two dimensions in Graduation, which are Intensification and Quantification, are also instantiated more frequently in Chinese essays. It seems that Chinese students tend to use a lot more Graduation elements than native speakers on the topic of Internet.

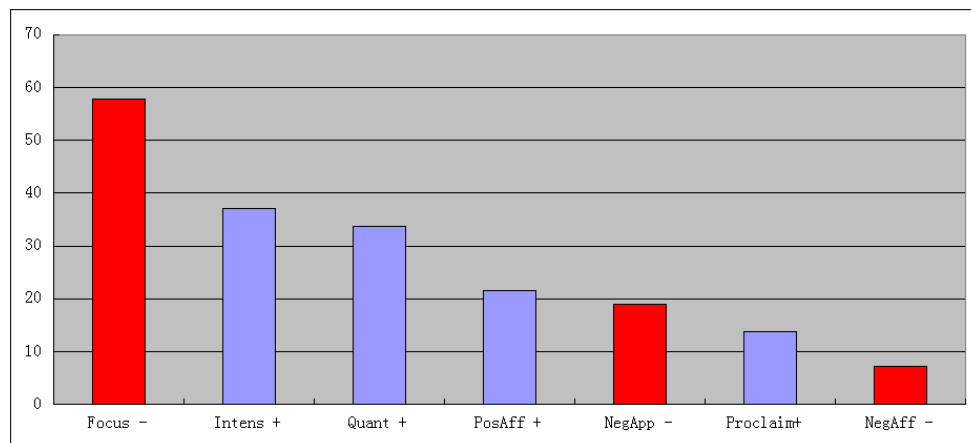


Figure 4. Significant appraisal contrast of EFL against L1 essays about Internet

Again, as illustrated in Fig. 4, negative evaluating terms of Appreciation and Affect are found less frequently in EFL than L1 writing. This partly confirms what is found in the previous discussion that Chinese speakers would stick to a one-sided argument, rather than establishing opposing positions, even when the prompt suggests a contradictory argument. This may also have to do with the fact that compared to L1 English writers, Chinese students generally hold a more positive attitude towards the effect of the internet. This explains why more positive attitudinal markers are noted in Chinese essays. When intensifying or quantifying those attitudinal markers, Chinese students tend to use simple emphasizing expressions, such as *really*, *truly*, or *so many*, as they consider them to be able to strengthen their argumentative points. In the same way, confirming terms, such as *I believe* and *I think*, showing positive Affect and Proclaim are used much more frequently than native speakers. This again, may have to do with their lack of critical skill of thinking and low vocabulary proficiency.

Native speakers, on the other hand, demonstrate a more conserved or even negative attitude towards the Internet, and that is why they use more negative appreciation items in their essays. And on top of that, the diversity of the lexical markers of negative appreciation is far greater than Chinese speakers. And this leads to the following hypothesis, that is, native essay writers generally use more negative evaluative items in their argumentation. and this is the very area where most Chinese students are weak in terms of their way of thinking and their lexical proficiency as well.

### C. Combinatorial Comparison of Appraisal Patterns in EFL and L1 Essays

When combining all the appraising items for the two essays together, native and non-native speakers demonstrate a distinctive way of evaluation. The result in Fig. 5 confirms the above hypothesis that native speakers are distinguished in their use of negative evaluative items than non-native speakers. The evidence comes from two sides. First, on the side of non-native English writers, they tend to use more intensifying and quantifying items (as seen in Fig. 5), more than 1,700 instances of Quantification items such as *much*, *many*, *firstly* and *secondly*, and 1,400 Intensification items, such as *more*, *also*, *most* and *just*, in their short argumentative essays. These two categories account for around 38% of the total annotation instances in the Chinese essays. And the appraisal items with the second highest frequency are those marking the category of positive Appreciation which are also used more frequently than those essays by native writers. Taking into account the statistics of both Graduation and positive Appreciation markers, we can make the assumption that Chinese EFL writers employ more positive lexical terms along with scaling values to strengthen their point of view in their argumentative essays.

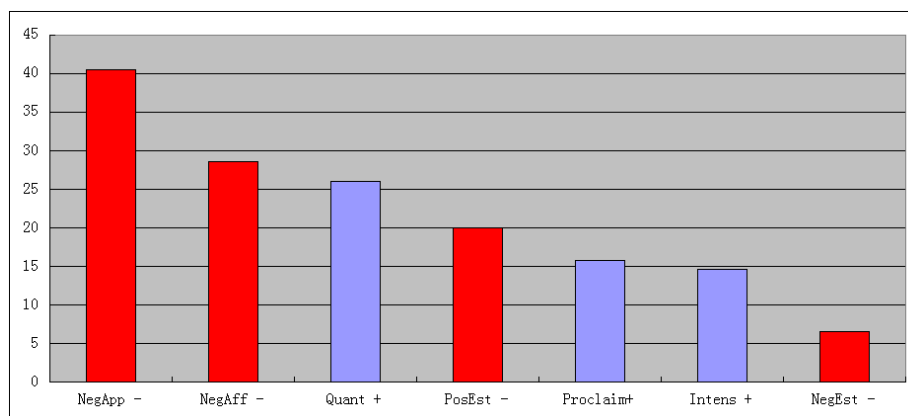


Figure 5. Overall significant appraisal contrast of EFL against L1 essays

For L1 writers, on the other hand, three of the domains in Attitude dimension: the Negative Affect (NegAff) and the Negative Appreciation (NegApp) and negative Social Esteem (NegEst), are initiated more frequently than EFL writers. This makes us believe that native speakers shows that critical way of thinking by instantiating opposing standpoints, introducing negative aspects to bring out more argumentative effect and to make the focal point more prominent. Also, native speakers demonstrate an obviously greater variety in their use of negative-coloring evaluating terms than Chinese language users as shown in table IV.

TABLE IV.  
MOST FREQUENT NEGATIVE AFFECT AND APPRECIATION MARKERS IN L1 AND L2 ESSAYS

L2 negative Affect	L1 negative Affect	L2 negative Appreciation	L1 negative Appreciation
ignored (1)	neglect (2)	negative (8)	problems (4)
nightmare (1)	disappointment (2)	limited (4)	hardships (1)
suffered (1)	alienated (2)	cheated (4)	forced (1)
complain (1)	vulnerability (1)	disadvantages (3)	limiting (1)
complaints (1)	selfish (1)	harmful (3)	diluted (2)
doubt (1)	concerned (1)	difficulties (3)	danger (2)
	bothered (1)	poor (3)	losing (2)
	disappointed (1)	decrease (3)	shortcomings (1)
	despair (1)	hard (2)	estranged (1)
			inappropriate (1)
			defunct (2)
			erroneous (2)
			drawbacks (2)
			unauthorised (1)
			problems (2)
			corruption (2)
			loss (1)
			mistake (1)
			wastes (1)
			hard (4)
			inappropriate (1)
			irritating (1)
			redundant (1)
			outmoded (1)
			unauthorised (1)

The result in table IV raises two points of concern. The first point is that the lexical items with negative connotation used by native language users, such as *alienated*, *vulnerability*, *diluted*, *defunct*, and *drawbacks* are found in neither the fourth-year nor the third-year college students' essays in WECCL. What Chinese students like to use are words such as *complain*, *nightmare*, *disadvantages*, or *harmful*, all of which are not frequently found in native speakers' essays. This may have to do with the fact that though EFL students understand the meanings of the words used by native speakers, they have no idea about how to use them in their essays. This is what is suggested by Nakamaru who found that most multilingual writers' "biggest needs are lexical in nature" (Nakamaru, 2010, p.110). In fact, as found in Nakamaru (2010) and other research studies, many errors or inappropriateness including those in grammar or structure in EFL essays is the consequence of not knowing what words to use in expressing their ideas.

As mentioned above, the heavier negative coloring in L1 essays may have to do with their critical way of thinking. According to Atkin (1997), critical thinking is closely related to social frames, which means that people's approach to the outside world phenomena is greatly framed up by their social background and is very hard to remodel. This is confirmed by Peng & Nisbett (1999) who also consider that reasoning has different forms: Chinese reason in ways different from Western tradition of formal logic paradigm, that is: speakers of English tend to think in a more aggressive and polarizing way, yet Chinese would like to moderate extreme points and seem to lack of critique. Therefore, Westerners tend to push things to the extreme and generate counterarguments, whereas Chinese generally maintain a compromising position without making opposing propositions. Therefore, combing the points made above, we propose that lexical proficiency might bridge the gap between the two styles of thinking. This means that by building up a consolidated armory of both negative and positive evaluative "weapons", Chinese EFL students will be equipped with more power in creating counterargument construction and better defend their points.

## V. CONCLUSION

The present study was focused on the appraising items used in Chinese college EFL argumentative essays. It aimed to ascertain whether Chinese EFL college students employ distinctive evaluative strategies in handling different essay topics. It also targeted at comparing the patterns of evaluative language used in Chinese EFL and L1 essays.

The study has found that native and non-native writers of English display identical evaluative patterns in discussing different essay topics. Meanwhile it was also found that by using more negative appraising items, native English writers

generate counterarguments to produce stronger argumentative power. Chinese EFL writers seem generally weaker in this point, which was found to be related to their insufficient lexical proficiency, especially of those with negative connotation. This finding provides the implication for the teaching of EFL writing that sufficient attention should be paid to the lexicon rather than stressing too much on pedagogical effort on sentence or discourse structures of the essay. In the meantime, the critical way of thinking should also be promoted, which is also closely related to a writer's lexical proficiency, because it would be greatly narrowed if the writer's lexical proficiency is insufficient.

Finally, the current research is focused on lexical appraising items, yet appraising could also be invoked through other means, such as sentence structures or extra-linguistic items. It is also true that inscribed appraisal items are absent in a great deal of writings. In addition, due to the limitations of time and data, the findings leave a potential space for further research and investigation. Therefore, more comprehensive research studies on Appraisal theory based on a richer collection of writing data will bring more refreshing evidence and insights into the pertinent study in the future.

#### APPENDIX A. APPRAISAL SYSTEMS AND ANNOTATION

Appraisal Analysis Convention			Annotation		
ATTITUDE	AFFECT		INCLINATION: long for, desire HAPPINESS: happy, pleasant SECURITY: together, confident SATISFACTION: absorbed, satisfied	PosAff	
			DISINCLINATION: fearful, wary UNHAPPINESS: sad, despondent INSECURITY: uneasy, anxious DISSATISFACTION: angry, bored	NegAff	
	JUDGEMENT	SOCIAL ESTEEM	NOMARLITY: lucky, fortunate CAPACITY: powerful, vigorous TENACITY: brave, loyal	PosEs	
			NOMARLITY: unlucky, hopeless CAPACITY: weak, sick TENACITY: timid, unreliable	NegEs	
	SOCIAL SANCTION		VEACITY: truthful, honest PROPRIETY: good, moral	PosSanc	
			VEACITY: dishonest, lying PROPRIETY: vain, arrogant	NegSanc	
	APPRECIATION		REACTION: engaging, exciting, splendid, enhance COMPOSITION: balanced, unified, pure, elegant VALUATION: profound, genuine	PosApp	
			REACTION: dull, boring, tedious, bad, repulsive COMPOSITION: unbalanced, contradictory, unclear, arcane VALUATION: shallow, fake	NegApp	
	ENGAGEMENT	CONTRACTION		DISCLAIM: no, never, yet, but	Disclaim
				PROCLAIME CONCUR: naturally, of course PRONOUNCEMENT: contend, the fact of ENDORSEMENT: show that, demonstrate that	Proclaim
EXPENSION			ENTERTAIN: perhaps	Entertain	
			ATTRIBUTE: argue, believe	Attribute	
GRADUATION	FORCE		QUANTIFICATION: few, many, huge	Quant	
			INTENSIFICATION: recent ancient, time/space adverbials, slightly	Intens	
	FOCUS: sort of, kind of, real, true			Focus	

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