

# On Cultivating Chinese Non-English Majors' English Thinking Ability to Improve Their English Writing

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**Abstract**—Writing is a big part of language learning and the writing ability of a language learner can well embody his language competence. Many Chinese non-English majors have difficulty writing a decent English essay. Although many teachers and scholars have been probing into ways of teaching English writing effectively, the results of the national CET 4 and CET 6 indicate that there is no big change in the writings of Chinese non-English majors. A careful study of many students' essays and interviews with some of them showed that students' ignorance of the differences between Chinese and English thought patterns contributes a lot to the problem. So, this paper first gives a brief introduction to thought pattern and the relationship between thought pattern and language, then analyzes the main differences between Chinese and English thought patterns, followed by a description of the negative transfer of Chinese thought pattern in students' writing, and finally proposes some practical and effective methods to help non-English majors learn to think as native English speakers do and improve their writing ability.

**Index Terms**—English thinking ability, Chinese non-English majors, cultivating, English writing ability

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the globalization of world economy and the increase of international communication, many Chinese people have realized the increasingly important role English is playing and will play in our life and work. Many students in colleges and universities are struggling to learn it well and many teachers are trying every possible means to help them achieve their goal. But unfortunately, the results of CET 4 and CET 6, two national exams to check the English proficiency of non-English majors in China, indicate that Chinese non-English majors usually score higher for the reading part while much lower in listening, translating and writing. Most of them can master the basic structures of English, but seem to have a hard job writing in English. Why? After making a careful study of many students' essays and interviewing some of them, we found that students' ignorance of the differences between Chinese and English thought patterns contributes a lot to the problem. To improve Chinese non-English majors' English writing ability, it is necessary for both teachers and students to have a clear idea of the differences between the two thought patterns. So, this paper will, based on the analysis of the differences between Chinese and English thought patterns and teaching practice, propose some practical and effective methods to help non-English majors learn to think as native English speakers do and improve their writing ability.

## II. THOUGHT PATTERNS

Porter and Samovar (1995, as cited in Xu, 2012) defined thought as the process in which the conceptions, judgment and reasoning are used to reflect the objective reality. In their opinion, thought pattern refers to the mental process of reasoning and problem solving prevalent in a community.

Although general thought patterns can be found in every community, people from different communities have different thought patterns. Let's take the Chinese thought pattern and English thought pattern for instance. The Chinese thought pattern is circling while the English thought pattern is straightforward. The Chinese have a circling thought pattern mainly because they are greatly influenced by Taoist views. In their opinion, people are not instantly rational, and they can solve problems quite differently. With the passage of time, they form the habit of beating about the bushes. Different from the Chinese, the native English speakers attach great importance to logic connection and rationality and therefore tend to think linearly. They maintain that they can find the truth if they adopt scientific methods and engage in logical calculations. In short, Chinese thought pattern is imaginative, subjective, synthetic, group-oriented, concrete, non-systematic and cyclical; western thought pattern is abstract, objective, analytic, egocentric, conceptualized, systematic, and linear.

## III. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THOUGHT PATTERN AND LANGUAGE

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis holds that there are no restrictions on the amount and type of variation to be expected between languages, including their semantic structures and that the determining effect of language on thought is total—

there is no thought without language (Whorf, Carroll, Levinson, & Lee, 1956). Jean Piaget (1980, as cited in Kong, 2009), however, has a different opinion; after doing many experiments he draws the following conclusion: language is the qualification for people to develop formal thought, but it is not enough. People develop their ability to think while engaging in social activities, after which their language ability develops. It is hard to tell whether language is the result of thought or vice versa. Many psychologists hold that on the one hand thought patterns influence language and on the other hand they interact with each other. In Chinese as in the other languages, such interaction does exist. To master a foreign language, it is necessary to understand how the native speakers think, and how they arrange and express their ideas.

To help Chinese non-English majors improve their writing ability, we must have a clear idea of the differences between Chinese and English thought patterns.

#### IV. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND ENGLISH THOUGHT PATTERNS

Since Chinese and English belong to different language systems, they are bound to be different in thinking patterns. The differences between Chinese thought pattern and English thought pattern can be summarized as follows: imaginative versus abstract, synthetic versus analytical, united versus opposite and group-oriented versus ego-centered.

##### A. *Imaginative versus Abstract*

On the whole, we Chinese are usually involved in imaginative thinking, which involves lots of metaphors, analogies, symbols and similes; the native English speakers adopt the abstract thought pattern, which is viewed as logic thought, of which the thought forms are making conceptions, judgments and reasoning. For example, in Chinese, father-in-law is called *Taishan* (a symbol of great weight or importance) and the husband of one's wife's sister is called *Tiaodan*. In Chinese classics, figurative analogies and metaphors are frequently employed to express such feelings as love, hatred, friendship and missing etc. English thought pattern is characterized by its strict grammatical structure, because the English language is controlled by logic connection. In addition, the idea of English language is very clear and its sentence structures are tightly organized.

##### B. *Synthetic versus Analytical*

Hu Wenzhong (1997) holds that "the thought pattern of people in the east is synthesis, while the thought pattern of people in the west is analysis" (p.153). Synthesis combines the separate parts, and elements of the objects into a whole while analysis separates the whole object into parts. Chinese people prefer synthetic thinking, which makes Chinese tend to think in historic reasoning while English-speaking people prefer analytical thinking. For example, Beijing Opera represents Chinese synthetic thought pattern, as it involves dancing, reciting, and singing. This kind of artistic synthesis can fall into four kinds of Western arts: dance, ballet, opera and play. The Western natural science has benefited a lot from analyzing. It is true that the more Western people analyze, the more concrete the object is.

##### C. *United versus Opposite*

We Chinese have a thought pattern of unity, for the traditional Chinese culture emphasizes that human beings and everything on the earth form one unity (Chen, 2005, p.368). In our culture, collectivism is highlighted. That's why we Chinese are unlikely to separate subject and object so clearly. And that's why Chinese students often mix subject with object, experiences with facts. The Western people, especially Americans, like analyzing things into two opposites: cause and effect, success and failure, good and bad and entertainment and work. It is no wonder that native English speakers avoid talking about work when they are having a party or holiday.

##### D. *Group-oriented versus Ego-centered*

Chinese people believe in collectivism, while native English speakers in individualism. G. Hofstede, and G.J. Hofstede (2005) define collectivism and individualism as follows:

Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: Everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. (pp. 75-76)

Collectivists tend to think that personal goals are less important than those of groups; while individualists tend to give priority to their personal goals. The two different concepts have great influence on people's choice of words, building of sentences, and even their creation of writing styles.

Now we have had a clear idea of the differences between Chinese and English thought patterns, but that is not enough. To help Chinese non-English majors improve their English writing ability, we also need to know clearly what negative influences Chinese thought pattern has on their English writing.

#### V. NEGATIVE TRANSFER OF CHINESE THOUGHT PATTERN IN CHINESE NON-ENGLISH MAJORS' ENGLISH WRITINGS

In the writings of Chinese non-English majors we can easily find some common mistakes in diction, syntax, paragraph or passage structure and literary style.

### A. *Negative Transfer of Chinese Thought Pattern in Diction*

Language is the carrier of culture and words carry the cultural connotations. Diction is the basis of a language, especially in writing. Lack of a large vocabulary, improper use of words, together with misspellings will definitely lead to poor performance in writing. Thus, wording should be considered first when we discuss the drawbacks in the writing of Chinese non-English majors.

#### A1. *Using too Many Specific or Concrete Words*

Chinese students are prone to use specific and concrete things to express themselves in order to form a sense of things. For example, some non-English majors would write such sentences like this: "In the past, the Chinese people led a life in deep water and hot fire." Reading such a sentence, the native English speakers will feel puzzled and wonder how Chinese people could lead a life in deep water and hot fire. To get across the idea clearly, we had better write like this: "In the past, the Chinese people led a life of extreme hardship". Comparing the choice of words used in the two sentences, we find that the native English speakers prefer abstract words instead of concrete ones.

#### A2. *Using too Many Verbs, Less Prepositions and Nouns*

English appears to be virtual, static and abstract, while Chinese appears to be solid, dynamic and specific. English usually enjoys preposition and noun advantages, while in Chinese sentences there are many verbs. For example:

a1. This English book too difficult, I can not read. (Original)

a2. The English book is totally beyond / above me. (Revised)

In (a1), "read" is a verb, while in (a2), "beyond," or "above" are prepositions. Influenced by Chinese, Chinese students tend to use more verbs to express ideas. Let's look at another example:

b1. To promote the kind of new products is not an easy task. (Original)

b2. The popularization of the new products is not an easy job. (Revised)

In (b1), "promote" is a verb, while (b2) "popularization" is a noun. English native speakers prefer nouns to verbs.

#### A3. *Word Redundancy*

The Chinese thinking is emotional. Non-English majors usually stress the importance of the situation and like to use rhetoric devices to strengthen the tone. For example, some write sentences as "We should take positive and progressive attitude towards life." and "We should have a good healthy body." and so on. The following is another example of redundancy found in Chinese Non-English majors' writings.

c1. We must oppose the practice of cheating in the final exam. (Original)

c2. We must oppose cheating in the final exam. (Revised)

Of the two sentences above, c1 is obviously wordy while c2 is short and concise. Semantic redundancy is one of the main features of Chinese English. Redundancy can be nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc., of which the most typical is a noun and verb redundancy.

### B. *Negative Transfer of Chinese Thought Pattern in the Connection of Sentences*

English grammar is clear; English sentences are usually logical and coherent; English emphasizes hypotactic relations. However, Chinese grammar is rather vague; Chinese sentences are usually broken; Chinese stresses paratactic relations. The different grammatical features between the two languages make the two languages adopt different connective devices to combine sentences. Influenced by Chinese grammatical system, Chinese Non-English majors are likely to write some broken sentences or sentence fragments. The following is a case in point: "My father is a teacher. He works in a rural middle school. He has some good habits. He very much likes doing sports. He also likes reading every day."

This paragraph consists of five simple short sentences, every one of which begins with the same pronoun "he", and sounds broken and quite monotonous. In fact, the author could have combined some of the sentences and make the paragraph look like this: "My father is a teacher who works in a rural middle school. He has some good habits such as doing sports and reading every day."

The improved version is made up of two sentences with connectors and thus it is clear and memorable. From this example we can learn that to show a subordinate relation in English, we can use prepositional or participle phrases, attributive clauses or some other devices. But in Chinese, to indicate a paratactic relation, we prefer to employ parallel structures.

### C. *Negative Transfer of Chinese Thought Pattern in Paragraph or Passage Structure*

When English-speaking people express their ideas, they comply to the tight logic. They state the main idea first and then support it by offering examples, quotations, statistics, and so on. English sentences have a rigorous subject-predicate structure. But the Chinese people adopt a scattering thinking, and they express their ideas according to the logic of things, time sequence, casual relationships. Chinese sentences are linked by the idea, although the structure is quite loose. Influenced by the Chinese thinking way, Chinese non-English majors have difficulty in composing an English paragraph or passage. Here is an example.

#### **A Letter Given To the President of the University**

Hello President, I am a student of our school, and my name is Li Ming. For the school has many sports venues and sports equipment, and I thank you. For the school has many sports venues and sports equipment, and I thank you. As we all know, exercise on their health and their growth is very important. Our school has a basketball court, football, table

tennis and so on almost all movement of sports venues and sports facilities. This gives students the school provides a good workout environment. Exercise is beneficial to the growth of human bones, muscles, enhances the cardiopulmonary function, improves blood circulation system, respiratory system, the function of the digestive system condition, is conducive to the growth and development of the human body, and improves the disease resistance, enhances the organism's ability to adapt. Sport is one of the most positive and effective means of enhanced physique. For today's university students, sports are one of the most important, have the sports venues and sports equipment, they can better get exercise, rather than stay in the dorm to play computer every day. For this I thank you once again. Thank you for your reading this letter. [Mistakes are original]

The student writer should have followed the format of a letter and written a letter of thanks. That is, he should have stated his purpose in the opening paragraph, then explained why he should thank the president of the university, and in the last paragraph expressed his appreciation again. But he arranged his ideas at will and put what he wanted to say in one paragraph, having no sense of how to write an English letter, which resulted in his failure to express himself clearly and effectively. We may classify the above type of writing into Chinglish pattern, not a typical English writing pattern, which is usually general-particular pattern, problem-solution pattern or matching pattern.

#### *D. Negative Transfer of Chinese Thought Pattern in Literary Form*

Modern English is characterized by being brief, forceful and simple. Chinese non-English majors, however, usually write a passage with too many sayings or metaphors, therefore, making sentences vague. Here are some examples:

d1. "I take a step as boundless as the sea and sky in smooth water;" is every essential quality of successful people.

d2. "Endure what others can not endure", this is the essential quality of a successful man.

d3. There is a celebrity saying "a man can succeed at almost anything for which he has unlimited enthusiasm."

d4. They should join in social practice, operation ability, and improve their interpersonal skills, such as speech contest and community activity. In other words, no pain no gains.[Mistakes are original.]

Frequently cited sayings or proverbs are often taken as "clichés" to native English speakers, even if they are grammatically correct. Mao Ronggui (1997) pointed out that "American people place far greater importance of the work of the writer who conveys ideas in fresh, new ways than on the one who wonders about on the crutch of cliché use" (p. 471; as cited in Ren, 2013, p. 523).

Since Chinese non-English majors are not able to compose decent English essays mainly because of the negative influence of Chinese thought pattern and their lack of English thinking ability, what can we do to cultivate their English thinking ability?

## VI. STRATEGIES FOR CULTIVATING CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS' ENGLISH THINKING ABILITY

To cultivate Chinese non-English majors' English thinking ability, we can adopt various measures, but the following are the most practical and workable.

### *A. Familiarizing Chinese College Students with the English Thought Pattern through Critical Reading*

Since it is mainly the lack of English thought pattern that has led to Chinese non-English majors' poor English writing, what we need to do first is familiarize them with the English thought pattern. To achieve the purpose, the most time-saving and effective is having them read authentic English essays critically, because reading and writing are closely related, while the former is receptive, the latter is productive. As far as reading is concerned, we should keep the following in mind:

#### *1. Selecting English Essays Elaborately*

With the purpose of knowing what the Chinese non-English majors have read, a survey was carried out in April of 2015. 100 freshmen who major in Computer Science and Politics participated in the survey of what have you read in learning English: articles in textbooks, articles in test-paper, articles in periodicals and English novels. The author of the paper got the result: 62 students claimed that they only read articles in textbooks or test-paper, 22 students claimed they read articles in some magazines occasionally, only 14 students claimed that they had read English novels and 2 students didn't return the questionnaire. From the survey, we can easily know that some Chinese non-English majors lack enough reading, especially critical reading. It is hard for them to get to know how the native speakers express their ideas and how they think differently from us. So it is quite necessary for Chinese non-English majors to read extensively and intensively.

If we Chinese are to get to know how people think in English-speaking countries, selecting what to read is very important. When it comes to choosing reading materials, we should follow several principles. First, we should select articles written by native speakers because these articles can well embody how native speakers think and convey their ideas. Second, we should select essays of different topics such as politics, economy, science, education, arts, sports and entertainment, etc. to meet the needs of different majors of college students. Hopefully, students can take interest in articles of their choice and engage themselves in critical reading. Third, articles of different writing styles including expository, descriptive, persuasive, and narrative ones should be taken into account so that students can soon get familiar with these styles after reading them. Finally, the newly-published articles can not only help students get to

understand how native speakers voice their ideas about different issues, but also help them get to know the latest development of the world.

Another point is to determine how many articles to read per term. In many Chinese colleges and universities, students are required to finish 6-10 units of a textbook and every unit usually consists of two passages. The author of the paper thinks that it is not enough for students to read 12-20 articles per term. So, it is advisable to select ten more English essays for non-English majors to read extensively in their spare time per term. And students can select three-to-five essays to read intensively by making reading notes.

### *2. Requiring Students to Read English Essays Critically*

The traditional ways of teaching reading and learning to read English essays will definitely result in students' poor competence in English. On the one hand, some college English teachers just help students understand the passage by explaining some language points and help students finish the exercises following the passage without analyzing the passage. On the other hand, while reading, Chinese non-English majors usually fall into the habit of remembering new words and expressions, or some useful sentence patterns and they are content after they can understand the passage. Therefore, college students just get surface understanding of the passage. With the aim of improving the efficiency of college English learning and teaching, we need to require college students to read critically.

Reading critically involves several steps. Firstly, students must realize that the words in one language do not fit together in the same way as the words of another language do and they need to figure out the different usages of words and how they are used in different contexts. Then, they need to analyze how the English sentences are connected. More importantly, students need to analyze how the ideas are organized in the paragraph or essay. Finally, they need to analyze the style of the essay so that they can get to know the different writing styles in English culture. "In fact, critical reading strategies enable readers to differentiate the major viewpoints from the minor one, drawing inference, understand the writer's position or attitude, evaluate whether the evidence listed in the text is relevant, effective or logical, and reflect on the text and its impact on the readers' value, attitude and way of thinking" (Ma & Pan, 2014, pp.78-79). After reading critically, Chinese non-English majors are more inclined to understand the characteristics of ideography and information transmission in English discourse. Thus, teachers can hope to elevate students' logical reasoning, generalization and creativity.

### *3. Requiring Students to Write Summaries or Comments on a Regular Basis*

Writing summaries or comments on a regular basis not only helps non-English majors master the usage of some words and sentence structures in the recently read passages, but also force them to read intensively, think deeply and express ideas in an ordered way. When they are writing summaries or comments, what they should think first is how to make them understood by native English speakers. Many scholars hold that the English thought pattern has a basic feature of straightforwardness. When developing a paragraph or even a passage, the English writer will, though not always, place the thesis statement of the essay, or topic sentence of the paragraph at the beginning with a statement. Then he will try every means to get his main idea or point of view directly illustrated with a number of sentences in a paragraph, or a number of paragraphs in an essay. At the end, he will come naturally to a conclusion to get the main idea or point of view restated for emphasis, if necessary. Writing summaries or comments on a regular basis helps non-English majors imitate how native English speakers think, organize and express their ideas gradually.

### *B. Deepening Students' Understanding of English and Chinese Words through Lectures*

In the language system, some differences of words in the two different languages cast great difficulties on the writing. Therefore, it is highly suggested that Chinese non-English majors should understand English words deeply and make appropriate use of them in English writing.

Some words are unique in English. "Garage sale", a typical way of selling in Britain does not exist in China. It is usually practiced by many English people in Summer and Fall, who open the garage door, put their spare items priced for sale, and put the flag of "Garage sale" on the pole near the road when the weather is sunny, usually for anyone who wants to buy without paying tax. Some words in Chinese may have particular meaning while in the English culture do not. It is known that things or animals like cattle, horse, and dog, dragon have different meanings in different contexts, so they has to be changed into the things with equivalent connotation in their context. For example, the proverb in Chinese "guozhe niuma burude shenghuo" can be converted into "lead a dog's life" in English for the word "dog" in western countries means loyalty, which is different from its connotation in China. The dog is "man's best friend", and almost everyone likes dogs, just as the saying "love me, love my dog". But in the Chinese culture the dog is a dirty and dangerous animal. For another example, "lida runiu" should be converted into "as strong as a horse" for ox in Chinese culture is equivalent to horse in terms of the strength in English culture.

There are other differences of usage and meaning between Chinese and English words. College English teachers need to deliver some lectures about words and help non-English majors to deepen their understanding of Chinese and English words.

### *C. Helping Students to Learn to Write Effective Sentences*

Sentences usually serve as the bridge between words and ideas, so it is important to write effective sentences to convey our ideas in English. Unfortunately, some non-English majors often make run-on sentences such as "A foreign

student faces many problems, for example, he has to cope with a new culture.” and “It was raining hard, the farmers could not work in the cornfields.”

On the one hand, we need to make students know effective sentences mainly involve several qualities such as clarity, brevity, and variety. On the other hand, we need to guide students how to achieve these qualities while writing. Helping non-English majors to write effective sentences can fall into several steps. First, to achieve clarity (the essential quality of writing), students should be taught to avoid jargons, most euphemisms, vague modifiers and fancy words and use the active voice on most occasions because lack of clarity in sentences often leads to misunderstanding, even failure in communication. Secondly, students should be told to avoid over-repetition, the first person pronoun and over-emphasis to achieve brevity. Thirdly, students are expected to change sentence openings, sentence lengths and structure and word choice to give a paragraph or passage rhythm and life. Finally, teachers need to list as many ineffective sentences as possible to help students revise them repeatedly. By doing the above, non-English majors can learn to write effective sentences step by step.

#### *D. Familiarizing Students with the English Writing Process*

The basic aim of a writing course is to develop the ability to write essays. But unfortunately, in many colleges and universities in China, the non-English majors do not have English writing course, so they cannot learn the writing techniques systematically and cannot get systematic writing training, which is in fact very important in English learning.

The process of English writing usually falls into several steps: prewriting, writing and rewriting, or planning, drafting and revising. We need to let non-English majors know what they should do in each stage. In the prewriting stage, they need to choose a theme, think about what to write and how to write, make an outline, consider the writing style, and work out an attractive beginning; in the writing stage, they should organize and write down the ideas in their mind; in the rewriting stage, they decorate their writing by checking for spelling and grammatical mistakes, looking critically at what has been written down and reviewing the writing at a number of levels and paying attention to the variety of sentences. Undoubtedly, this process is not linear; they can move back and forth, if necessary. After non-English majors get familiar with the writing process, they are more likely to divide the writing task into several parts and they may think it will be easier for them to write an English essay by following the regular writing steps.

#### *E. Setting up a Writing Platform*

In China, teachers and students seldom communicate as to what to teach and how to teach no matter in or after class, and nor do the students ask teachers any questions even if there is something they feel confused about. For this phenomenon two main factors are responsible. One is that teachers are always occupied with their teaching. A college English teacher usually has 16 or more classes a week. He has to teach listening, reading, writing, translating, and so on. In other words, he has to teach everything about English, which leaves him/her little free time. The other is that a majority of Chinese students are self-conscious; they are introvert and do not like talking with others, not to say express their ideas about something or ask teachers questions. So, to promote teacher-student communication, it is imperative to set up a writing platform.

With a writing platform, students and students, and students and teachers can communicate with one another anytime and anywhere. They needn't worry about being found asking silly questions or saying something unidiomatic and as a result being laughed at. With a writing platform, we can upload some well-written essays written by the native English speakers or by the students themselves. By reading the native English speakers' essays now and then, students can gradually become aware of how native English speakers think and how they express themselves clearly and effectively and then have a better understanding of the differences between Chinese and English thought patterns. By reading the essays written by students themselves, they are most likely to build up their confidence to write well in English. By communicating with teachers and classmates now and then, they can enhance their friendship, learn from one another and learn to express themselves more freely, confidently, and effectively. Then their composing acceptable English essays will be expected soon.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, writing ability is the comprehensive embodiment of a person's English proficiency. To improve the writing ability of the non-English majors in China, not only should we make them aware of the differences between Chinese and English thought patterns and spare no effort to guide them to think as native English speakers do by reading extensively and critically, but we should also make them aware of the different implications of some words in Chinese and English and help them learn to use words appropriately, exactly and idiomatically. Besides, getting them to know how to make effective sentences, how to develop a paragraph and how to compose an essay is absolutely necessary. With the help of other students and guide of the teacher through a writing platform, the non-English majors are sure to give full play to their potentials and creativity and make excellent English learners.

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