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Writing English with a Chinese Mentality

Julia Kit-Ching Ho

Research indicates that a person's first language can influence his or her ability to learn a second language. Ringbom (1987) declares that contrastive analysis can assist to "solve the practical problems of language teaching" (47). Connor (1996) states that "contrastive rhetoric studies have discovered differences between Chinese and English writing" (41). In other words, contrastive analysis can help Chinese students predict problems in their English writing.

Under the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, English and Chinese differ greatly in various linguistic aspects, such as rhetorical patterns and coherence. All these differences have an impact on Hong Kong students' English writing. This explains why they often make mistakes in their English composition. In addition, Hong Kong students seldom learn about the English writing style before coming to study in America. When attending ESL writing classes, Hong Kong students, especially newcomers, find it hard to complete an essay within the fifty-minute class period. This is possibly because that they spend too much time writing an introduction.

The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to determine whether the "known-new sequence" technique can help new ESL students from Hong Kong write a coherent introduction quickly; (2) to test if the new knowledge can help them complete and even edit their in-class essays.

RHETORICAL PATTERNS

English and Chinese have different rhetorical patterns, because they developed from different cultures. Linguists (e.g., Lado 1957, Larsen-Freeman 1980, Damen 1987) report that there are structural variations across cultures. This leads to cross-cultural interference for people learning a second language. Ulla Connor (1966) writes that "rhetorical conventions of the first language interfere with writing in the second language" (5). Applying this principle to Hong Kong students, we can conclude that the Chinese rhetorical patterns hinder Hong Kong students' English composition.

Contrastive rhetoricians (e.g., McCarthy 1991, Scollon 1991, Matalene 1985) have studied Chinese rhetorical patterns. McCarthy claims that different languages have diverse textual patterns. According to his analysis, English has a "linear and hierarchical" pattern, whereas Oriental writings are characteristically indirect.

In like manner, Connor (1996) advocates that "different cultures have different expectations of writing and that these different expectations are internalized as different patterns of discourse" (167). Leki (1992), an ESL educator, points out that the organizational pattern chosen by ESL students may be "a result of rhetorical constraints not shared by English speakers" (102). In brief, the rhetorical pattern of Chinese differs from that of English, which affects Chinese students' organization of their English composition.

COHERENCE

In addition to rhetorical patterns, contrastive rhetoricians also study the coherence of texts. Due to the diversity of English and Chinese rhetorical patterns, Chinese students have difficulties in managing the coherence of their English essays.

Connor and Farmer (1990) indicate that the coherence of texts can be shown by progression. They list three kinds of progression: parallel, sequential, and extended parallel. Chinese writing uses parallel progression, in which the topics of successive sentences do not vary. Here is an example (the topic of each sentence is underlined):

1. Chocolates are a national craving.
2. Records show they are sold in huge quantities—11.2 pounds per capita each year.
3. Designer chocolates often sell for nearly \$30/lb.
4. It is obvious that these candies are America's number one choice.

Unlike Chinese, English writing typically uses sequential progression. In this type of progression, topics of successive sentences are not always the same, and the predicate of one sentence can become the topic of the next sentence. Here is an example (the topic of each sentence is underlined):

1. Computer interviews are used by market researchers to assess product demand.
2. Using these, many different products are analyzed.
3. For example, people may be asked about detergents.

Kolln (1992) makes a similar point that English sentences are typically linked together by the "known-new sequence":

the first sentence of a paragraph consists of new information, it will introduce the topic, but the second sentence can only be

connected to the first by means of known information—usually in the subject slot. (350).

To their English-speaking teachers, Chinese students' English composition lacks coherence because they employ Chinese writing habits in their English writing. McCarthy (1991) professes that one reason for poor second language writing is the partial knowledge of the rules and patterns of the second language. Without knowing the differences between the rhetorical patterns and cohesion of English and Chinese, Chinese students have difficulties in writing a coherent English essay.

THE STUDY

This study involved fifteen new students from Hong Kong. They came to study at Brigham Young University-Hawaii (BYU-H). When they participated in the study, they had not attended any ESL courses at BYU-H.

A writing workshop was set up to help all new international students learn the English rhetorical pattern, but they were grouped according to their nationality. Only the new Hong Kong students were taught the known-new sequence. In addition, a survey form was constructed to inquire about the subjects' opinions on the helpfulness of the "known-new sequence" in writing an introduction.

In the workshop, the new Hong Kong students were taught the English rhetorical pattern. First, they learned the characteristics of an introduction of an English essay. They then practiced writing an introduction on the topic "Pets." The writing time was recorded. Following the introduction section, the subjects were taught how to write the body and the conclusion of an English essay.

After that, the subjects learned how to apply the known-new sequence to writing an introduction. After learning the principle, the subjects applied that knowledge to writing an introduction on the

topic "The reasons for studying at BYU-H." The writing time was recorded also. Finally, the subjects wrote an essay on one of three given topics and employed the "known-new sequence" to writing the introduction.¹ The writing time was recorded. At the end of the workshop, the survey form (Appendix A) was distributed to the subjects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following table shows the time subjects used to write each introduction. ("Before" means that the subjects had not learned the known-new sequence, whereas "After" means the subjects had been taught the known-new sequence.)

Table 1 shows that after learning the known-new sequence, nearly all the subjects took less time writing an introduction. The subjects' writing times for essays are tabulated in Table 2.

Table 2 indicates that all of the subjects could finish an essay within thirty minutes, which was the time limit for the

writing section of the placement test.

In addition to the timing, the subjects' writings also indicate the vitality of the known-new sequence in helping Hong Kong students' English writing. Subject E's introductions can illustrate this point.

The following is an introduction written by subject E before learning the known-new sequence.

Pets is animals which are very kind. Almost every family have a pet, they love pets very much, and I am one of them. I would like to share how I feel about having a pet and how to become my close friend.

In this introduction, subject E spent six minutes and twenty seconds to write twenty-seven words, an average of eight words per minute. On the other hand, she had a different performance when applying the known-new sequence in her writing. Here is her introduction on the topic "The reasons for studying at BYU-H."

Table One. The Time Required for Writing an Introduction

Subject	Before	After	Subject	Before	After
A	6:20	5:50	I	6:30	6:30
B	6:30	4:40	J	10:00	6:00
C	8:00	6:00	K	10:00	6:00
D	6:30	5:30	L	11:00	5:00
E	6:20	5:20	M	10:00	5:30
F	7:15	6:00	N	10:00	5:00
G	8:00	7:10	O	7:00	6:00
H	10:00	5:00			

Table Two. The Time Required to Write an Essay

Subject	Topic No.	Time	Subject	Topic No.	Time
A	3	22:00	I	1	28:20
B	3	20:00	J	1	23:50
C	3	25:00	K	2	25:00
D	2	27:00	L	1	26:20
E	1	26:00	M	3	28:30
F	3	23:00	N	1	22:30
G	3	25:40	O	3	25:00
H	1	24:10			

There's not many university in Hong Kong. Since then, students try to study abroad, and usually they'll seek to go to some popular countries and cities. But I chose to study in Hawaii which is not known well in Hong Kong. Because I may learn about how to be independent and have a chance to get to know people from lot of other countries.

This time subject E wrote thirty-three words in five minutes and twenty seconds, an average of twelve words per minute. She spent less time but wrote more words in the second introduction. All of the subjects wrote either the same or a higher number of words in their second introductions, but they took less time than they did to write their first introductions. This again reflects that the new technique did play a role in helping Hong Kong students write an introduction in a timely manner.

The results of the survey (see the form in Appendix A) also indicate the

helpfulness of the known-new sequence. All of the subjects gave affirmative answers and commented that the known-new sequence did directly or indirectly help them write a coherent introduction faster. Subjects' responses on questions 2, 4, and 6 are tabulated below.

According to the survey forms, all of the subjects said that they spent more time writing an introduction without the knowledge of the known-new sequence. In addition, they all commented that the known-new sequence did help them write a coherent introduction quickly, and they also recommended sharing this knowledge with other Chinese students.

This new insight can motivate researchers to study whether Chinese students can benefit from using the known-new sequence in writing their English essays. For example, studies can be carried out to see whether the known-new sequence can be applied to an entire essay. Another related research question

Table 3. A Summary of Subjects' Opinions on the Known-New Sequence

Question	Subjects' Responses
2: How does this technique help you in writing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) familiarizes me with the American style b) helps me write a coherent essay quickly, think logically, write smoothly, and have a clear idea of my writing c) learn to focus on writing the main points and shortens my thinking time d) enables me to organize the content more logically arrange my information more effectively, and avoid redundancy
4: How can this technique shorten writing time?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) organize and expand a paragraph easily b) know what to write in the next sentence c) gives me hints to start a precise introduction d) have more ideas in my mind when writing e) avoid wasting time in thinking unrelated information f) clearly know an American teacher's expectation
6: Without this it difficult to write an	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) five subjects replied "sometimes" (depending on technique, is the topic) b) two said "no," but need more time in planning c) eight answered "yes" because they can write an introduction introduction easily

may be to test if known-new sequence can help Asian students other than those from Hong Kong write a quick introduction and a coherent essay.

NOTES

1. The three topics for the essay were: (1) Compare and contrast your home country and Hawaii; (2) Describe yourself; and (3) The advantages of saving money.

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APPENDIX A

1. Is it helpful to you in writing after knowing the known-new sequence?

Yes _____

No _____

2. If yes, how does this technique help you in writing?

3. Do you think the *old and new* information relationship can shorten the time in writing an introduction?

Yes _____

No _____

4. Please explain the answer you chose for Question 3.

5. Your timing in writing an introduction

Before _____

After _____

6. Without the knowledge of *old and new* information, is it difficult for you to write an introduction?

7. Without the knowledge of *old and new* information, do you spend more time in writing an introduction?

8. Should the knowledge of *old and new* information be shared with other Chinese students?