

# An Interpretation of English Writing Obstacles to Chinese English Learners

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**Abstract**—The aim of foreign language teaching is to help the learners master the non-native language. What a teacher is required to do, in this sense, is to help the students to acquire the abilities of listening, speaking, reading and writing to name in detail. In practice, however, the teaching aim is not so easy to achieve as is expected. It is common to find that these skills gained by students are not only unbalanced, but some skill, writing, for example, is hard to improve even though more time and more energy are expended on it than on others. The fact shows that there must be some obstacles in the teaching and the learning of this language skill. This article is intended to identify these obstacles to English writing first, then make a categorization of them and explain them in detail, followed by some suggestions to overcome them, with the aim of providing some theoretical and practical advice for English teachers.

**Index Terms**—writing competence, cognition, obstacles to English writing

## I. OBSTACLES TO ENGLISH WRITING: AN INTERPRETATION

### A. Objective Obstacles to Writing: Cognitive Competence vs. Linguistic Competence

College English writing teaching in China has been bothered by the problem of “time-consuming and inefficient”: both the teacher and students spend lots of time and efforts, but the students’ writing ability seems remaining the same. In most cases, neither could they write coherently and logically, nor is their English understandable. To solve this problem, researchers and Chinese English teachers have tried many methods and developed many theories to overcome it. In reality, despite that the effects do exist; they are not as much as expected. Students still can not express themselves in English as freely as they can in Chinese. Sentences are hard to understand: The improper use of lexis, and ungrammatical sentence patterns appear from place to place, let alone misspelling, or wrong punctuations. Despite the evident fact that Chinese is their mother tongue, of which they have better command than of English, considering the time and efforts consumed by the teacher and students, the outcome is relatively little. This phenomenon reflects there must be some obstacles in English writing teaching and learning.

The obstacles to English writing cannot be clearly interpreted without a mention of the writing competence. Writing is a complex intellectual process which involves not only the thinking skills, but language abilities. In other words, writing competence is reflected by the writer’s ability to express himself by means of written language, i.e., the ability to choose and select the proper words and sentence patterns to express clearly and effectively. A writer’s writing competence is so important that it affects his readers’ understanding about his works. In this sense, writing embodies the writer’s ability to wield language comprehensively ([1], p. 3). And only by means of integral sentences, or at least understandable language, can the aim of writing – conveying the writer’s idea and expressing his feelings – be realized. Writing competence is the ability to convey. A writer with deep thoughts but poor writing ability more often than not will confuse his readers rather than lead them to a novel world or into the profound thinking about the world. Writers with high writing competence can open a window for his readers which they have never known or thought about. In this sense, writing competence is of importance.

A student who intends to express himself must, first of all, have certain ideas to express, then a good command of the language he chooses as the means to express. The former is commonly known as the cognitive ability, and the latter as linguistic ability. These two constitute the writing competence ([2], p. 6). Any piece of writing, on the one hand, reveals the writer’s previous experience, his attitude to the world and his understanding about it; on the other hand, it shows his mastery of the language employed to express his thoughts and ideas. A writer with good cognitive ability but poor linguistic ability could not make himself clearly understood, even though his viewpoints may be enlightened. Likewise, with high linguistic ability but low cognitive ability, a writer can neither make a good piece of writing since he has nothing or nothing new to tell. And only when the thoughts are embodied in the proper and understandable written form, can they thereby be properly conveyed, thus a good piece of writing is made. Therefore, we may rightly conclude that a writer who conveys his thoughts in written language needs to have enough knowledge about the language and general intellectual skills and the insight into the physical world ([2], p. 67). In other words, a good writer must have the cognitive ability and linguistic ability, which constitute the two basic qualities for a good writer.

Generally speaking, college students have gained the cognitive ability, i.e., they have the abilities to think, to judge and to generate and organize their ideas properly, preceding their English language ability. On the surface, such cognitive ability may be beneficial to the development of their English writing skills in that it seems that a student with the cognitive ability will not have to worry about what to write, thus the only trouble lies in how to write. In other words, the task of the English teacher becomes easier than it seems to be, diminishing only to the improvement of the student's linguistic ability. In reality, however, the cognitive ability shaped in the Chinese culture exerts much negative effect on English writing rather than do some help to English writing. The first obstacle to English writing is thus formed.

It is universally acknowledged that the same idea may be expressed differently in different languages, due to various histories and diverse cultures. Take an example from Hu & Liu ([3], p. 36), if a person wants to show a strong feeling that he dislikes somebody, a Chinese individual might say, “我最讨厌他” (subject-adverb-verb-object) in Chinese language, and a possible translation version may be “I hate him most” (subject-verb-object-adverb) in English when he tries to express such emotion. In daily communication, however, “He is the last one I love” (subject-verb-predicative-attributive clause) prevails in English, i.e. the latter is a common way that a native English speaker would like to choose. A syntactical comparison leads to a conclusion that the English syntactical tendency employed by the Chinese seems influenced by the Chinese language as the sentence pattern chosen in English is similar to the Chinese one. Moreover, the reason that a Chinese fails to choose the sentence pattern commonly employed by the English native speaker – negative meaning (to dislike) in positive form (to love) – is that there never appears such a syntactical pattern in Chinese language. Hence, the cognitive ability plays an important role in English writing. Therefore, the cognitive ability, despite its positive effect on English writing – a student with cognitive ability has sufficient sources to choose from – more often than not exerts much negative impact on English writing, making the English much like Chinese.

Furthermore, English competence of the Chinese college students – another aspect of writing competence – is rather low as shown in the sentences above. But in most cases the English diction employed by Chinese college students is much incomprehensible despite the form of English. Such “English”, known as “Chinglish”—the form is English while thinking pattern is Chinese – certainly throws both Chinese and English native speakers into confusion. This problem occurs because the students in the Chinese culture have a tendency to think and express in Chinese. They usually think in the mother tongue – Chinese – firstly, then translate the ideas into English in his own interpretation of English. At the same time, lack of the English language competence fails the free employment of words

in English. In other words, the limited vocabulary of English and the uncertainty about the proper expressions underlie the failure of free expression in English. ([4], pp102) When a Chinese student intends to or has to express in English, he habitually and unconsciously tends to utilize his familiar way of expression, i.e., Chinese, or just translates Chinese into English according to his understanding about English.

Briefly speaking, the cognitive ability acquired in the Chinese culture, and the sharp contrast between English and Chinese linguistic abilities constitute the objective obstacles to English writing. Objective obstacles are so termed because they exist somewhat outside the scope of the teaching of English writing.

### B. Subjective Obstacles to Writing

Different from objective obstacles, subjective obstacles exist in the process of teaching and learning English writing. Writing, in nature, is the written form of thought. Compared to this thought, writing in pedagogical practice is one of the four language skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, which should be taught and acquired in the process of teaching and learning. Writing skill is interrelated to the other three language skills in that writing would be impossible without certain amount of input through listening, reading, and even speaking. Though writing is based upon the other three skills, it differs from them. There goes a person who may be highly appreciated *Gone with the Wind*, for example, by reading it, or retell the story orally as moved as or even more moved than its written form after reading or listening to it if he understands it so well, cannot produce the same wonderful work by himself. The difference between writing and the rest of language skills shows that writing is the last skill to master of the four. Moreover, the term “Literary Master” which refers to those who specialize in choosing and employing and organizing words further proves the difficulty in gaining the skilled command of words. Nevertheless, writing, as one of the language skills, is not beyond learning. The poor ability of Chinese college students in English writing is interrelated to the attitudes of teachers and the attitudes held by students in the process of teaching and learning.

## II. TEACHER'S ATTITUDES TO ENGLISH WRITING

Teachers' attitudes affect their devotion to teaching.

In view of the student's practical employment of English in their future career, *China Syllabus for College English* specifies that students after the learning process of college English should acquire “relatively high ability in reading, certain ability in listening, and preliminary ability in writing and speaking” [5]. *Guidebook for College English* (PP1-2) recently released by China Ministry of Education lays a significant emphasis on development of students' writing skills. College English Test Band 4, corresponding to the national specification, sets the scores of listening, reading and writing in the ratio of 20:40:15, with a likely prospective of upping the score of writing to a larger degree. This emphasis on students' writing skills, unfortunately, is misinterpreted

by some teachers who aim their teaching at helping students pursue high marks in the CET Band 4. So after balancing the different score ratios in reading, writing and listening, and the different efforts needed in improving mark in the three skills respectively, teachers focus their teaching attention and efforts on reading and listening, abandoning writing because of the time and effort consumed in improving the writing skill. And interestingly enough, the exam results seem to prove that they do have had a good choice since most students under the guidance of such teachers do pass the Band 4 easily.

Other teachers are aware that writing is a must in developing language competence. But at the same time, they are more conscious of the efforts needed from the teachers and the students. Awareness of the difficulty and the time being consumed leads them to withdraw from the needed and required effort into writing. Instead, they would provide large numbers of English templates for students to recite, or some samples to copy.

Such utilitarianism no doubt affects the teachers' input in their teaching. Teachers under such drive at most explain the writing process, or read some sample compositions in their writing classes, rather than point out the errors or correct the papers, which are more effective in improving students' writing. Writing is learnt through practice. A knowledge of how to write through practice is more important than that of theoretical rules of writing. The way the teacher chooses to teach writing deprives the students of the chances to improve their English writing ability. So the teachers' attitudes are subjective obstacles to English writing.

### III. STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TO ENGLISH WRITING

Most Chinese students have been well trained in Chinese writing before they undergo their English writing processes. They can freely express themselves in nearly all styles of writing, and can write a one-thousand-word composition easily. Some even can write traditional Chinese poem and Ci<sup>1</sup> in Chinese which are quite difficult due to their restrict requirements in style and rhyme. They can freely convey their thoughts to meet all the requirements of Chinese writing. In this sense, it can be argued that most of them have rather high writing competence in Chinese. As a good piece of writing is not only the reflection of the competence of the language employed, but the cognition of the writer as well, it seems that high Chinese writing ability may contribute to English writing, making a piece of English writing half-done since the students already possess the cognitive competence, one aspect of writing competence, and high writing ability in Chinese. And what really requires the teachers and students to do is improve the linguistic competence, another aspect of writing competence.

But facts prove opposite. It is this relatively high Chinese writing ability that plays a negative impact on English writing. Most students with such high Chinese

writing ability hold the belief that "writing is interrelated". The ability of writing out a one-thousand-word composition in Chinese makes a one-hundred-word English composition (the requirement of CET Band 4 writing) beyond question". Such belief gives rise to a halfhearted attitude to English writing.

As is mentioned above, writing competence is composed of cognitive ability and linguistic ability. Any excellent piece of writing is based upon the deep and sufficient insight into the physical world no matter what language is employed for expression. In this sense, it may not be wrong to say that writing is interrelated. But the ability to produce a one-thousand-word Chinese composition does not make one-hundred-word English essay beyond question. What the students ignore in this case is the linguistic ability, another aspect of writing. It is fair to argue that students do know of writing to a certain degree, but not enough to make them treat it seriously. Students have not realized the profound differences between the two languages. What they actually neglect is the language itself. Shaped by culture, language is arbitrary ([6], p. 67), which makes the languages differ.

Such an incomplete understanding of language further proves the unprofessional quality of some teachers, who fail to help the students learn the nature of English writing because of the failure to inform students of how to write in English. In addition to the students' incomplete understanding about writing and some teachers' unprofessional quality, it cannot be ignored that students' English linguistic competence is rather low, much lower than that of their Chinese. His Chinese competence always interferes with his English writing.

In a word, students' incomplete understanding about English writing and their low English linguistic competence is another subjective obstacle leading to their low English writing competence.

### IV. SOLUTIONS & CONCLUSION

For a second language users, mistakes and errors are sometimes are unavoidable. And non-mistakes are even difficult for a native speaker to fulfill. However, the excuses of such kind cannot mislead the fact that mistakes or errors are different from writing competence or language ability. On the contrary, it cannot be neglected that overcoming the obstacles to English writing can improve students' linguistic ability.

In overcoming the obstacles to English writing, the role of the teacher should not be neglected. In the classroom, teachers are the dominators. They are not only imparters of knowledge, but designers of the course, and monitors of the learning process. They, on the one hand, understand the nature or the requirements of English writing; on the other hand, they know what the students already know, and what else is needed to know. So what teachers do in classrooms plays a decisive role in overcoming the obstacles.

Based on what has been discussed above, it might be rightly argued that a teacher, first of all, should regulate his attitudes, which is the way of solving the problem of

<sup>1</sup>Ci: Chinese poetry written to certain tunes with strict tonal patterns and rhymes schemes, in fixed numbers of lines and words (Chinese-English Dictionary, Commercial Press, 1982)

the subjective obstacles. Teaching in writing should observe the writing principles and its requirements, as its primary goal is to help the student come to possess the writing competence. English teaching aims at improving the student's linguistic competence. With good attitudes, English teaching will be enjoyable.

Secondly, a teacher should rectify the students' attitudes to English writing, which is the approach to the solution of the students' problems. Teaching is to lead the student out of ignorance. So teachers are required to interpret the requirements of English writing, explain the linguistic differences between English and Chinese, and demonstrate the different writing practices in the two languages. However, teaching is the way to lead the students out of ignorance or correct the improper attitudes, specifically, taking writing ability for granted when writing in English because of high Chinese writing ability. With this sufficient information and never-give-up efforts, students can easily put right their incomplete or incorrect understanding about English writing, and then take English writing seriously.

Thirdly, a teacher should pay more attention to the language competence, i.e., to teach students to think in English while they use English. To help students to overcome the negative transfer from Chinese thinking pattern and language pattern to English writing is a big and challenging task. The big problem for them is employing the Chinese thinking pattern in English writing. When enough exercises are provided, and when they learn to think in English while writing, all the existing problems in English writing are overcome. In reality, this is hard to achieve as English is their foreign language. However, while their English is not elegantly enough, acceptable at least, and they on this stage can express themselves clearly and fluently, students are on the way to make further improvement.

It should be noted that the students are the main factor in the teaching-learning process, though the teacher plays a decisive role in improving the students' writing competence. All the efforts and activities in teaching depend on the students' cooperation. Therefore, students play an important role in improving their writing competence too. The positive attitude is to cooperate with

teachers, give up their inappropriate attitudes, and develop the self-confidence in English writing. At the same time, students should be prepared to take many pains to learn English, comparing the two languages, observing the English writing rules and overcoming the Chinese thinking and writing patterns. In this way, they can make the English writing idiomatic both in form and in content.

To summarize, there exist two kinds of obstacles in English writing, objective and subjective ones. Teacher's involvement can make the problems less difficult, and it needs student's cooperation as well.

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