

# Understanding Challenges for Chinese Vocational College Students in Improving Writing Skills

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**Abstract**—Although the number of vocational college students in China has been increasing with the strong support and encouragement of the Ministry of Education for the past a few years, the writing skills of many vocational college students have been problematic. To have a deeper understanding of the writing problems, this research study explores the challenges faced by college students in improving their writing skills with a quantitative approach. 954 vocational college students participated in the survey and contributed their thoughts. The top five most frequent factors that negatively influence students to achieve their best learning outcomes were ranked and listed. According to the data, nearly 95% of vocational college students are short of writing training courses and nearly 90% of students are too busy to self-learn. The findings of this study suggest that improving the writing skills of vocational college students requires greater attention and closer cooperation from colleges, teachers, and students.

**Index Terms**—vocational college students, writing skills, challenges, Chinese vocational college, college teachers

## I. INTRODUCTION

In April 2019, the Chinese state council decided to expand the enrollment of higher vocational colleges by 1 million [1]. Later in the same year, the Chinese Ministry of Education's director, Wang Jiping, stressed in public that vocational colleges enjoy the same important status with academic universities and the central government is increasing the financial budget to invest in the development of vocational colleges [2]. There are, up to 2020, already 1418 vocational colleges in China with a student size as large as 11.34 million and accounts for 53 percent of total higher education institutions [3]. The ambitious goal of the central government is in part to further move higher education to popularization, which helps make at least half Chinese adults receive higher education. The increasing enrollment of vocational college students has once again drawn the attention and research interests of many Chinese scholars and educators back to the quality of vocational education. Some scholars and educators have concerns worrying about the increasing number of students may hurt the education quality of many vocational colleges [4]. Most Chinese people believe that the education quality of a vocational

college is not as good as that of a university, as students who can earn high scores from the Chinese college entrance exams are picked by universities first. Students who choose to go to vocational colleges normally have a much weaker academic performance in their high school compared to students who go to universities [5].

Under the new situation, vocational teachers inevitably face more challenges such as a heavier workload and larger size student groups when it comes to improving education quality. Among many challenges, how to effectively improve the writing skills of vocational students becomes a hot spot. To many Chinese, one's writing ability represents one's education level, so it is critically important if not the most important [6]. Although training students' writing skills and improving students' humanistic literacy are not a new challenge, it has haunted many vocational college teachers for years and has not been fully addressed [7]. Different from universities, curriculums of almost all vocational colleges do not focus on training students with theories and writing skills but concentrate on helping them master employment-oriented skills, as the ultimate educational goal of vocational colleges is to cultivate skilled workers for society [8]. However, it does not mean that writing skills are not important for vocational college students. On the contrary, it is a pragmatic skill for workers in their careers and relates closely to their promotion. One of the reasons that should be held accountable for less training of writing skills to college students is insufficient training time. Compared to academic universities normally having 4 to 5 years curriculums, vocational college students only have a three-year curriculum. Thus, even some teachers of vocational colleges realize the importance of writing skills for the future career development of students, lack of enough training time makes their realization hard to be transferred to workable teaching plans [9]. Some other scholars, such as Guo and Zhang, argue that pedagogies of some college teachers are problematic and attribute the incompetent teachers to a factor causing students' slow progress in writing, as many vocational colleges prefer to hire high-skilled workers without enough teaching experiences to train students [10]. Thus, they suggest that vocational college teachers should self-exam their teaching methods and improve their writing skills first.

While many scholars and educators discussed the importance of writing skills in training vocational college

students and some touched a few reasons for hindering students to reach their best learning outcomes of writing skills, little is known about what problems vocational college students face in improving their writing skills. This research study aims at filling the academic gap through quantitative data, so college teachers' understandings of what problems vocational college students face can be enhanced.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, discussions of several important writing theories, some previous studies on teaching writing, and how these studies and theories related to the writing problems of Chinese vocational college students are reviewed and analyzed.

### A. *Social Constructionist Theory*

The social constructionist theory plays an important role in explaining the learning process of students. The central argument of this theory is that knowledge is constructed by group discourse, so through participating group discussions, students can learn better and more [11]. As languages convey information organized by lots of different messages, the more students discuss and send their messages, the more students receive and learn new messages in group discussions. During the whole discussion process, students are both messages senders and receivers, so they do not only need to share their distinctive culture, experiences, and perspectives to their counterparts, but they also have to process and analyze the messages they receive before giving their feedback. Hence, students can mutually build their thoughts, enhance their understandings, learn new perspectives, and practice their communication skills through such a collaborative communication process [12].

This theory is important in analyzing the teaching methods of training vocational college students. As discussed above, vocational colleges normally spend more time teaching students professional skills than writing and communication skills, so many college teachers prefer to adopt to a teacher-centered training model, but not a peer-centered model. In the teacher-centered training model, teachers play a key role in all training phases, from course design to homework feedback. Students' main task in this learning style is to follow their teachers as close as possible, so they can grasp the knowledge from their teachers, the key role of teaching. However, as students barely have chances to discuss with their classmates in the teacher-led class, they do not have chances to organize their thoughts, digest theories by thinking about issues, listen to their peers' perspectives, and analyze different opinions. Writing problems of vocational college students is due in part to the lack of enough peer discussions caused by the teacher-centered training model.

### B. *Product Approach Theory*

The product approach refers to an educational theory aiming at how to improve students' writing skills. Nunan(1989) states what students can produce is the key

to the product approach to writing [13]. Researchers and scholars found that students can reduce their grammar mistakes, have more robust writing structures, and smoother transition sentences through reading excellent writing samples [14]. Thus, writing teachers who support and use the product approach normally pay attention to the final product of students' work. During teaching, they guide students with many good finished papers and believe that students can be well oriented by good writing samples and learn how to construct their writing structure and embellish their arguments in writing.

The sources of writing samples to guide students can be various at the collegial level. It can be a peer's composition in which sophisticated writing skills are demonstrated or it can be a teacher's article with good writing structures. Sometimes college teachers also directly use research papers from academic journals to show their students how a good academic paper looks like. The point is that vocational college students, like writing learners at other levels, have to be given enough time to read a certain number of good papers to better improve their writing skills. However, in practice, many vocational college students do not have such a training model. There are two main reasons. One is that, as mentioned before, lots of vocational colleges do not have the writing course in their curriculum. Vocational college teachers have to closely follow the curriculum so they are not supposed to teach something that the curriculum does not have. The other important reason is that some college teachers focus more on language skills than writing skills in Chinese courses. The priority of many Chinese courses is given to reading the classic Chinese, poems, proses, and fiction but not academic papers, while there is a huge gap between writing academic papers and composing Chinese poetry.

### C. *Learners' Writing Problems*

At the college level, writing a good academic paper is not easy, especially for students at technological and vocational colleges. Jiang yongmei, a vocational college teacher, examined the 165 graduation theses of her students with a content analysis approach and concluded that more than twenties serious mistakes were made by each thesis paper on average [15]. The type of mistakes ranges from the misuse of citations to thesis format. Chinese college-level writing requires a more complex format, a more logical structure, and more advanced writing skills, so it takes lots of time, energy, and practice. Some common writing problems of college students can be generalized to the following points:1) misuse of citations, 2) grammar mistakes, 3) loose writing structures,4) illogical arguments, 5) word choice, 6) superficial discussions, and 7) writing format. These are just general writing problems among college students. When it comes to analyzing the writing problems of a student from a specific major at a vocational college, more factors need to be taken into discussions. For example, if a student majoring in communications shows many deficiencies in his or her papers, besides the above-mentioned seven points, the deficiencies may usually

relate to his/her misunderstandings of theories in the communication field.

#### *D. Unique Challenges for Chinese Vocational College Students*

Along with writing problems discussed in the previous part, Chinese vocational college students face more challenges in improving their writing skills. These challenges can be analyzed from the following three aspects. The first aspect is the vocational schools. As the teaching curriculums of vocational colleges are only three years, one year less than curriculums of universities, vocational students have a more compressed and intensive learning schedule. On top of it, the teaching curriculums of vocational colleges, as introduced above, focus much more on professional skills than theories and writings. It further shortens students' time and energies to practice their writing skills.

The second aspect is the teachers of vocational colleges. As good scholars and teachers can normally make more money and enjoy a higher social status in academic universities, so many good scholars and experienced teachers choose to work in Chinese academic universities, and thus, the vocational colleges are left behind and become a secondary option [16]. As salaries that vocational colleges offer are not as attractive as that of academic universities to experienced scholars, vocational colleges have to lower their recruitment standards. Normally, the recruitment requirement of academic universities for an instructor's position is that the job applicant must have a doctoral degree in the relevant field, but for the same position at most vocational colleges, a master's degree is enough. As a result, teachers at vocational colleges are normally younger and have less teaching experiences. However, it does not mean that working at a vocational college is easy and light. Many vocational college teachers are having an overloaded working schedule while earning much less than their counterparts working at academic universities. Moreover, as the educational goal of vocational colleges is to produce skilled workers, vocational colleges have a certain number of teachers having working experiences, which is a double-edged sword in training students. On one hand, college teachers with working experiences can contribute their working experiences to students and help students have a better understanding of how manufactories work in practice. On the other hand, as these teachers do not have teaching experiences and many are not familiar with writing academic papers, they can hardly help students improve writing skills.

The third aspect is at the individual level, namely, the vocational college students. As all Chinese vocational college students fail to earn good scores from their higher school entrance exams, it means that they may need to adjust their approaches to learning. Many scholars and vocational college teachers discussed the flawed learning methods of vocational college students [17]. For example, many vocational students have an issue with time management [18]. Some vocational students can not effectively manage their time to do what they need to do, while improving writing skills requires lots of time and

practice. Furthermore, the learning interest of individual learners has to be taken into discussions. As some students fail to perform well at the college entrance exams, they become less interested in practicing writing skills. What is worse, some students become less confident and pessimistically think that their future is dark as they are losers at the Chinese college entrance exams. These negative emotions and feelings further erode their learning interests and motivations and finally lead to slower progress in sharpening writing skills.

### III. RESEARCH METHOD

#### *A. Research Question*

Although many scholars and teachers had discussed negative factors in blocking vocational college students to improve their writing skills, how vocational students self-evaluate their challenges in improving writing skills remained a riddle. To enhance the understandings of teachers in the field, this present study attempted to answer the following question: what problems do vocational college students have in improving their writing skills?

#### *B. Survey Design*

The questionnaire is designed based on the careful discussions of researchers, the findings in the literature, and suggestions of participants in the trial survey. A survey with 20 choice questions was given to research participants regarding possible factors that may negatively influence their learning outcomes of writing. Under each question are three answers and research participants could choose only one. Three answers respectively are "yes", "no", and "do not apply to my situation". The use of language in the survey is Chinese and all questions are designed as simple and clear as possible.

#### *C. Data Collection*

All research participants are vocational students from 5 different vocational colleges in Guangdong. As researchers are vocational college teachers, researchers used people connections to seek the help and assistance of other vocational college teachers in recruiting participants. To make the data accurate and valid, only vocational college students with at least one-year learning experiences were recruited to participate in the survey. Considering that college freshmen do not have enough experience with teaching styles of their teachers, college students in the first grade were not invited. The research survey was put online and invited participants were given the web address. The online website existed for two weeks and 954 vocational students contributed their answers to the research survey ( $n=954$ ). The age of participants ranged from 18 to 26 ( $M=19.65$ ). The gender rate was 541 female students to 403 male students. The number of female students is slightly larger than the number of male students.

#### *D. Results*

As shown in table one, 898 out of 954 research participants reported that the absence of writing courses

in vocational colleges was an important factor in hurting their learning outcomes of writing skills. This was the most frequent choice among all 20 given items. The following factor is the time issue, as 88.5% of participants believed that they were too busy to pay enough attention to improving their writing skills. The third highest factor came from the teaching content of vocational college teachers, as high as 83.9% of students reported that their teachers did not teach them writing skills in their courses. The next impacting factor is the lack of writing training programs such as a writing center and/or a writing club. 81.4% of students chose it as a negative factor to hurt their learning outcomes. Lack of learning interest is the fifth-highest factor reported by participants and 75.7% of participants chose it. The following high voted factor that was not listed in the table but also important to know is the lack of learning foundation, which earned almost 650 votes. (See Table I)

TABLE I. TOP FIVE NEGATIVE FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS(HIGH TO LOW)

Factors	Votes	Percentage
Absence of writing course/writing-related course such as Chinese courses	898	94.1%
Too busy to pay attention to improving writing skills	845	88.5%
Instructors do not teach writing skills	801	83.9%
Lack of training programs such as a writing center or a writing club	777	81.4%
Lack of learning interest	723	75.7%

#### IV. DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The findings of this research study are valuable in enhancing educators' understandings of challenges faced by vocational college students in improving their writing skills, as the findings clearly show the most frequent challenges restraining students to reach their best learning outcomes of writing from students' side. The findings reflect a three-layers problem that includes the college level, the teacher level, and the individual level, which are discussed one by one as below.

##### A. The College Level

First of all, vocational colleges should be held accountable for their negative roles in training students' writing skills, as over 94% of students did not have writing courses. The findings of this research study are in line with the arguments of some other research studies in the same direction [19]. The data clearly shows that most vocational colleges have not paid enough attention to writing and the curriculums of these colleges need to be adjusted immediately. Writing courses in many vocational colleges are only optional courses. According to the importance of writing courses, it should be changed to compulsory courses at vocational colleges, so more students can receive their writing training. Moreover, insufficient attention of vocational colleges to training students' writing skills is also reflected by the fact that there are not enough numbers of writing training programs for students at vocational colleges. Arguably,

various training programs such as a writing workshop and interest-based clubs provide learning resources and information for students interested in certain subjects, for example, English or photography. Students who want to improve their writing skills can attend a writing training program where they can meet peers having the same interest and develop their group discussions and other learning activities. The writing training centers and groups are good supplementary for training students writing skills. Vocational colleges should do their best to launch these interest-based groups and writing training programs. Developing these programs are not costly and only requires several teachers and empty classrooms. The findings of this study strongly suggest that vocational colleges should do it as soon as possible for helping vocational students improve their writing skills.

##### B. The Teacher Level

The findings of this study also indicate that many teachers at vocational colleges are not doing a good job in teaching students' writing skills. Understandably, teachers have to follow the curriculum and if the curriculum does not require teachers to teach writing skills, they may have to skip it. However, undeniably, some vocational college teachers have not realized the importance of writing skills for the future career development of college students. College students may become skilled workers first for 3 or 5 years after graduation, but they may not be workers for their entire lives. Some students may become managers and some students may go for a master's degree after having enough working experiences. The point is that they are growing and when they become managers and postgraduates, they may have to use writing skills again and writing skills at that time become critical to them. Therefore, vocational college teachers must look at the writing skills of college students in the long term and pay more attention to it. For those teachers who are not good at writing, they should get training. Academic writing skills are also critical for the career development of vocational teachers. Only when teachers have excellent writing skills, students can be well trained.

##### C. The Individual Level

The findings of this study also strongly imply that at the individual level, vocational college students face some difficulties in improving their writing skills. First of all, they have an intensive and stressed learning schedule. As discussed before, vocational college students only have three years to study coursework, while they have to compete with university students who spend four years learning both theories and skills in the job market after graduation. For making their students more competitive in the job market, vocational colleges have to arrange more courses and training modules for them. If writing courses are not in the list of compulsory courses for students, most college students may not have extra time and energies to practice their writing. The relatively short learning time for college students is very disadvantageous, which makes everyone rusher. Teachers have to rush too as they have to catch up on the teaching schedule. Many college students are exhausted as their time is fully

occupied. What is more, compared to university students, many vocational college students face more challenges in improving their learning outcomes such as establishing confidence, which we discussed in the literature. Hence, college students need more time to get their learning habits changed and improve their learning approaches. An intensive schedule is not helpful for their growth.

#### D. Learning Interest

Furthermore, the high votes of the lack of learning interests from the student participants could in part illustrate the problematic writing quality of college students. Since vocational college students are not interested in writing, how can they develop good writing skills? In China, almost all college students are young traditional students, some are even under 18 when they get into colleges. These young men/women have no working experience and do not know the importance of writing that may have a long term impact on their future. It is the responsibility of their teachers and advisers to educate them on the importance of writing, so they can pay enough attention and start developing their writing skills as soon as possible. The relationships between learning interests and learning outcomes have been well studied and discussed by many scholars and once students learn the importance and usefulness of writing, they are more likely to get more interested in practicing writing [20]. All in all, college students' learning interests in writing need to be further guided and developed by teachers and advisers.

#### V. LIMITATIONS

There are a few limitations to this study. First of all, the quantitative methodology used in this research study can only build a basic understanding. For example, we learned that about 3/4 college students do not have learning interests in writing skills, but we do not know why they are not interested. Thus, future research studies should further explore the causing factors for the lack of learning interests of college students, so they can be better helped and guided. Moreover, the relationships among the curriculum of vocational colleges, interest-based groups, and learning outcomes of college students need to be tested in future studies. Last but not least, all research participants were from vocational colleges in Guangdong, China, so students from other provinces, say, students from vocational colleges in Beijing may have different situations.

Despite these limitations, this research study is meaningful in that it examined the challenges faced by vocational colleges in improving their writing skills, which was rarely discussed in the past. To the best of our knowledge, this is the earliest study on examining the negative factors in hurting Chinese vocational college students' potential to reach their best learning outcomes of writing. Also, the sample of this study is considered to be a good representation of the student population in Guangdong, China.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the challenges faced by vocational college students in improving their writing skills with a quantitative approach. The negative factors influencing college students in improving writing skills at three different levels, namely the college level, the teacher level, and the individual level have been carefully analyzed and discussed. This research study is not only meaningful in helping enhance teacher's and scholars' understandings of the difficulties faced by college students, but also provides a solid foundation with empirical data for future studies in the same field. According to the findings of this research study, we strongly suggest that scholars and educators could apply qualitative methods to deepen our understandings of Chinese vocational college students' difficulties and challenges in improving writing skills. At the same time, we urgently call on more attention to improving students' writing skills from both the colleges and teachers.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Dr. Zhiwei Wang conducted and wrote the research study and collected data. Prof. Qisha Chen did data analysis. All authors had approved the final version.

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