

# Helping Chinese High School Students Make the Transition to Writing in a Western Academic Style

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Chinese students who wish to study in tertiary education in one of the English speaking countries are expected to make the transition from studying English as a foreign language (EFL) at high school to using English for academic purposes (EAP). However, teachers in western universities often notice recurring language features amongst Chinese students, which clash with their expectations of what constitutes western academic writing conventions. This was highlighted by Li (2002, as cited in Liu, 2010) who compared the writing of native English writers in America with international students from mainland China.

According to Leki (1992), “international students’ linguistic, cultural/attitudinal and academic experiences distinguished them from the English-speaking based writers” (p. 249). This is important because it may lead to differences between the style of writing teachers expect to read and the type of essays international students actually produce. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to introduce the style of writing that Chinese students have learnt through high school study in both Chinese and English language classes, and then suggest how EAP teachers can help them make the transition to a more western style of academic writing.

## Writing experiences at Chinese high schools

### *The format of the College Entrance Exam*

The College Entrance Exam is crucial for Chinese students’ choice of universities. As a result, the vast majority of Chinese high school teaching and learning is highly test-oriented, including English writing instruction.

The English section of the College Entrance Exam requires students to write between 100-200 words on information given in Chinese (see Figures 1 & 2).

It is important to notice that the main ideas and the basic organisation and structure for the topic are given. Therefore, students are not required to consider these when constructing their answers. Instead, they can just translate these main ideas and set them out in a 3 paragraph structure as provided. As a result, there is little need for students to learn to structure a piece of writing or critically consider its content.

### *The use of templates*

One common method of English writing instruction at Chinese high schools is the use of

**Figure 1.** Example of the English Writing Section of a College Entrance Exam (TL100.com, 2010)

07 年高考浙江卷  
在英语课堂上，你喜欢你的老师授课时只用英语，还是英语，汉语兼用？某英语杂志社就此话题邀请中学生发表看法。请你围绕 “How do you prefer your English classes to be taught? In English only, or in both English and Chinese?” 这个问题，参考所给要点，选择一种授课形式，写一篇英语短文。

授课形式以： 只用英语	授课形式而： 英语、汉语兼用
优点： 有助于提高听说能力等……	有点： 易于理解等……
缺憾： 不易听懂等……	缺憾： 英语氛围不浓等……
结论： ……	结论： ……

注意： 1. 词数 100~200，短文开头已给出（不计词数）。  
2. 参考词汇： atmosphere 氛围  
I prefer my English classes to be taught in.....

writing templates (see Figure 3). To prepare the students for the various writing formats to be tested, a variety of templates are designed, including those for classification, process, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, and argumentative essays. These are very user-friendly for Chinese students in that they can write an essay by choosing a type of template according to the topic given, and then simply fill in the gaps. However, this leads to students rarely needing to produce grammatically correct complete sentences to express their ideas because, with the templates, students can simply treat writing as a gap-fill and translation exercise.

### Length of texts

As seen in Figures 1 and 2, students taking the English section of the College Entrance Exam are only required to write between 100-200 words (see Figure 4). Therefore, the challenges of writing long pieces in English, whether under exam conditions, or for coursework on a computer, are considerable for Chinese students entering western tertiary education.

### Writing in Chinese compared to English

Although there are obvious differences for high school students writing in Chinese and in English, there are still many similarities. For example, they are expected to produce 800-1000 words of timed writing in an exam situation. This length is similar to the timed writing requirements of English language universities, such as Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, where the author currently works. In addition, high school students often need to generate a

writing title and a thesis statement based on the given reading materials. As well as this, many common western academic writing features, such as thesis statements, topic sentences, supporting evidence, paragraphing and transitions, are also present in Chinese writing at high schools (TL100.com, 2010).

However, there are also many differences. For example, Chinese writing tasks often include moral or conceptual topics. Examples of College Entrance Exam essay titles from 2012 include: 'the difference between common people and talented people' (Shanghai), 'thinking of life value from a drop of water' (Sichuan province), 'worry and love' (Jiangsu province), and 'concerns about others and society' (Anhui province and Chongqing) (Wenku.baidu.com, 2012). Also, the beauty of the language and the clarity of the structure are highly valued, while originality is less emphasised. Furthermore, while in Chinese writing students are expected to include supporting evidence, this commonly comes in the form of examples from personal experience, and memorised facts about famous people and historical events, rather than from academic sources.

### Suggestions

#### Consider students' prior learning backgrounds

It is important for EAP teachers to understand Chinese students' previous writing training in order to more easily identify students' particular learning needs, predict what problems they may encounter, and design or choose the most appropriate materials or exercises to help them develop. For example, teachers may ask

**Figure 2.** English Translation of the English Writing Section of a College Entrance Exam (TL100.com, 2010)

College Entrance Exam (2007, Zhejiang province)

Writing task: In your English class, do you prefer your teacher to speak English only, or both English and Chinese? An English magazine club is asking for middle school students' opinions on this. Please write a short English essay on the title of "How do you prefer your English classes to be taught? In English only, or in both English and Chinese?" Main points are listed in the box for your reference.

Teaching language: English only	Teaching language: both English and Chinese
Advantages: helps improve listening and speaking ability...	Advantages: easy to understand ...
Disadvantages: not easy to understand ...	Disadvantages: English atmosphere not strong ...
Conclusion: ...	Conclusion: ...

Note: 1. 100~200 words, the beginning is given (not in the word count)  
2. Reference vocabulary: atmosphere (atmosphere in Chinese)

I prefer my English classes to be taught in... \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 3.** Example of Writing Template (TL100.com, 2010)**(1) advantages and disadvantages type framework**

Nowadays, there is a widespread concern over (the issue that) **(essay title)**. In fact, there are both advantages and disadvantages in **(essay topic)**. Generally speaking, it is widely believed there are several positive aspects as follows. Firstly, **(advantage 1)**. And secondly **(advantage 2)**.

Just as a popular saying goes, "every coin has two sides", **(essay topic)** is no exception, and in another word, it still has negative aspects.

To begin with, **(disadvantage 1)**. In addition, **(disadvantage 2)**.

To sum up, we should try to bring the advantages of **(essay topic)** into full play, and reduce the disadvantages to the minimum at the same time. In that case, we will definitely make a better use of the **(essay topic)**.

**Figure 4.** Example of High Scoring College Entrance Exam Writing by a Chinese High School Student (TL100.com, 2010)

I prefer my English classes to be taught in English only. As we all know, a good learning environment is vital if we want to study English well. Classes taught in English provide students with such an environment. When English is the only language used in the classroom, students will have more opportunities to practice listening and speaking. Therefore, they will be able to learn more quickly.

However, there are also some problems with this teaching method. As we haven't mastered enough English words, sometimes we may find it difficult to follow the teacher. Slow learners may even lose interest in English.

Practice makes perfect. To learn English well requires a lot of practice. Therefore, I like my English classes to be taught completely in English.

students to write or discuss individual stories on what was regarded as good writing in high schools, how they learned to produce good writing, and what methods were effective in improving writing, such as analysing model answers, and the use of templates. Such self-reflective activities can facilitate students' learning about EAP writing because those who have undergone the acquisition of writing in their first language and EFL can draw their own inferences for their EAP studies. For example, with a little guidance, students should be more able to identify for themselves which aspects of their previous instruction will act as strengths and which may need to be adapted or abandoned in the new study environment. In this way, by eliciting information about students' previous learning, teachers can help them to apply their existing academic writing skills and techniques when developing their new EAP writing abilities.

***Clarify the similarities and differences***

It is also valuable if instructors can assist their students in making the transition from an EFL to an EAP context by raising their awareness of the differences and similarities between Chinese high school and western university writing. For example, if students have been encouraged to use a large amount of poetic language in their writings, teachers will need to

point out to them that particular types of content, style and structure are only appropriate in particular situations, and, therefore, using poetic language to demonstrate writing talent is not appropriate in academic writing in most western style universities. In contrast, if students have received training in clear organisation of ideas in L1 writing, teachers can encourage them to transfer those organisational skills to their university writing. Also, it might be beneficial to emphasise that the two writing styles are different, but neither is wrong, and then highlight how students are expected to write.

***Provide sample language***

It might also be helpful to focus on building the students' English language production ability at university level. One option would be to select and use sample sentences or paragraphs related to the students' writing assignments to allow them to see how language is being used, before they move on to more broad study. It may also be helpful to conduct comparative analyses of writing samples between EFL writers and proficient EAP writers, as this also builds upon students' previous learning experiences of teachers reading out good writing models. This is a good transition strategy, because it is one that students are familiar with.

### Guide analysis and critical thinking

Kobayashi and Rinnert (2002) argue that it cannot be assumed students know how to evaluate the information they read or question its accuracy or reliability. Similarly, Wang (2004) noted that Chinese high school students have commonly had very few chances to develop critical thinking skills, and that most of them have not experienced the process of finding information from outside sources and incorporating it into their arguments. They also have not learned how to cite external sources. Based on the fact that Chinese students are used to working from models and sample pieces of writing, a good strategy might be for teachers to use examples of writing which include critical analysis. A similar method could be used to point out to the students the ways of citing research.

### Allow students time to change

Chinese students have spent many years immersed in the high school system, and have learnt to be successful in it. To change to a different style of writing, including the use of academic register and the application of critical thinking, takes time and clear guidance in order to enable them to be similarly successful in western tertiary education. However, with time, and by incorporating some of the strategies outlined, EAP teachers can assist Chinese students to make this transition.

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