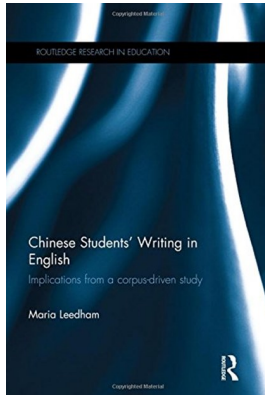# Book Review: Chinese Students' Writing in English: Implications from a Corpus-Driven Study

Jonathan Culbert

Chinese Students' Writing in English: Implications from a corpus-driven study

Author: Maria Leedham

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'Chinese Students' Writing in English' investigates undergraduate writing at UK universities. In particular, the author aims to identify the characteristics which distinguish the writing of two groups of students: those whose first language is Chinese (L1 Chinese) and those whose first language is English (L1 English). A further aim is to examine how these characteristics vary across student year groups and academic disciplines.

The British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus and an additional, although unspecified, collection of texts assembled by the author, were taken as a starting point. From these, two smaller corpora were compiled: one of L1 Chinese (Chi123) and one of L1 English (Eng123) student assignments. A corpus linguistics method was used to interrogate the two corpora. The study was corpus-driven rather than corpus-based in that an initial keyword analysis of the corpora, rather than a detailed set of research questions, provided the impetus for the research. In addition to the quantitative results arrived at through this corpus linguistics approach, a more qualitative analysis was carried out on specific pairs of texts to investigate the data further. The author also made use of interviews with discipline lecturers, writing tutors and students to illuminate the findings.

The core of the book is the numerical data generated from the keyword analysis. A keyword in this context is a word or label (by which a text has been marked up) which occurs with an unusual frequency in one corpus compared with another (p.42). Keywords were identified in the following areas: connectors, informal language, first person pronouns, and visuals.

The findings are often intriguing. For example, the informal phrases 'what's more', 'a little bit' and 'last but not least' occurred occasionally in Chi123, but did not appear at all in Eng123. However, contractions with 'not' (e.g. 'can't') were significantly more prevalent in Eng123. In the use of first person pronouns, the L1 Chinese group were much more likely to use the pronoun 'we' whereas the L1 English group used 'I' significantly more often. One particularly interesting finding not predicted by the literature is that Chinese students used visual elements such as tables, figures and text written in bulleted lists more frequently in their assignments.

Although the numerical data suggest interesting distinctions between the corpora

they are at times problematic. In particular, in the discussion of informal language, the actual token counts were very low: informal language (as revealed by the keyword analysis) accounts for only 0.05% and 0.004% of Chi123 and Eng123 respectively (the reviewer's calculations). Rather than suggesting difference, these data suggest a remarkable level of similarity in the two corpora. More importantly, when examining variation between academic disciplines, there is the possibility of outlier texts disproportionately affecting the group mean. The author generally does not focus on individual texts, but where she does - for qualitative analysis - it can be seen that the chosen assignments could potentially skew the group average. In the discussion of the use of visuals in Biology, the Chi123 assignment chosen for more detailed analysis (one of eighteen) accounts for more than 25% of all the figures used. In the discussion of bulleted lists in Economics, the chosen Chi123 assignment (one of twenty) accounts for almost 30% of all the relevant features.

A further question concerns the 'implications' of the book's subtitle. It is not clear in exactly what sense this term is to be taken. If the author means consequences or possible recommendations, there is an initial problem. One key feature of the BAWE corpus is that all the assignments were awarded a 'good' grade by their institutions: consistent with a 2:1 or better according to the British system. As such, all the assignments looked at in this study and, by inference, the range of approaches in terms of language and visuals have been deemed acceptable. In light of this, the author's explicitly descriptive, as opposed to deficit, approach towards the L1 Chinese texts is of little significance. In fact, a slightly deficit approach seems to be adopted towards the L1 English texts, when she recommends that L1 English students be encouraged to use more visual elements in their writing.

An alternative reading of 'implications' could be inferences or explanations that can be drawn from the findings. Here, the author makes some interesting suggestions. For example, drawing on Hoey's (2005) lexical priming theory and Hasselgren's (1994) concept of 'lexical teddy bears' the author argues

persuasively that Chinese students' writing in English is the product of a heavily exam-oriented education system in China, which prioritises neither writing skills nor knowledge of register. This argument is made all the more persuasive through the inclusion of sample exam and learning materials.

On the whole, however, these interpretations are only tentatively offered and are not part of the primary research conducted by the author. Furthermore, at times the suggestions do seem to be purely speculative, such as when the author suggests Chinese students are more likely to include visuals as a consequence of their experience learning and using Chinese characters.

Despite the possible pitfalls regarding how the data are interpreted and the at times speculative nature of the explanations given, the author does achieve what she set out to: 'to add to the body of knowledge on current undergraduate student writing' (p.133). With Chinese students expected to continue being the largest international market for UK institutions (Havergal, 2014), this is a topical, yet relatively neglected, area of research to which this study has made a pertinent contribution.

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Jonathan Culbert is an EAP tutor at XJTLU. Previously, he worked at the University of York, England. He holds an MA in Linguistics.
jonathan.culbert@xjtlu.edu.cn