Cultural Impacts on Indirectness in English Writings of Chinese ESL/EFL Learners

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Abstract

It is generally assumed that English writings by Chinese EFL learners are characterized by an indirect and less explicit way of presenting a paper than the way used by western writers. Seventy-three compositions by Chinese undergraduates are collected and their writers interviewed. The findings of the study reinforce previous scholars' view that Chinese students' prefer to follow an indirect way in writing English. The interview provides some Chinese terms such as *huiwei,* aftertaste, *wenziyu,* literary crime, which help explore from a cultural perspective the reasons for indirectness strategies manifested in threes aspects: the lack of a clear thesis statement, preference for using adverbial clauses as a framework for the main clauses and the recurrent use of indirect expressive modes.

Western scholars agree that a well-written exposition presents the thesis statement of a paper at the beginning of a paragraph. Readers do not expect evidence to appear before the main thesis. They believe that a readable writing must "begin by stating a clear thesis or point at the outset, then supporting this point with evidence in the body, and restating the point at the end" (Horning, 1993, p. 9). Many scholars (Kaplan 1966, Matalene 1985, Scollon & Scollon 2000, Jia & Cheng 2002) notice that Chinese ESL students' writing seem to be the inverse of English discourse. Summary statements are always delayed till the end, an indirect way of introducing their theses. These scholars try to give their thoughts on reasons for the indirect way of writing. Kaplan (1966) attributes it to the differences between the thoughts patterns of Chinese and western cultures. Scollon and Scollon (2000) argue that the Chinese concept of self makes it difficult for Chinese writers to be direct. This paper tends to explore the cultural reasons for indirectness in English writings by Chinese students at the college level which is manifested in three aspects: the lack of a clear thesis statement at the beginning of a paper, preference for using adverbial clauses as a framework for the main clauses and the recurrent use of indirect expressive modes, such as rhetorical questions, analogy and formulaic phrases.

Avoidance of Stating Thesis Directly

During my years of teaching, I have observed similar writing preference in my students' English compositions as Young (1982, p. 75): "the steady unraveling and build-up of information before arriving at the important message." To prove the hypothesis that indirectness is a salient characteristic in Chinese students' English writing, I interviewed students and analyzed their compositions entitled *Chinese Ways of Learning, Good or Bad.* The participants include:

1. 73 first-year science students in HIT whom I taught   for three terms from the fall of

2002 to 2003.
2. 149 compositions on Prize Essay College Student Writing Contest published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

During the interview, I mainly focused on two research questions:
1. How English and Chinese writing are taught in previous education?
2. How do they write a Chinese and an English composition?

The results of examining their compositions can be summarized by the following table:

Table 1 English Writings by students in HIT

Theme summary	Clear	Vague	No thesis
	31 (42.5%)	15 (20.5%)	27 (37%)
Position of	First paragraph	Middle (Body)	End
Thesis statements	30 (41.1%)	4 (5.5%)	12 (16.4%)

From the above table, we clearly see that most students (57.5%) seemed to have a hard time directly stating whether they approved of the Chinese way of learning . Twenty-two (30.1%) clearly presented their positions on the topic in the first paragraph; 37% of them, however, did not present a clear thesis statement, not even a concluding sentence to sum up the main argument. Some opened the essays with their own learning experiences and personal stories (sometimes irrelevant to the topic) and delayed the thesis statements till the end. Some (20.5%) seemed to deliberately avoid a definite assertion to the title. Rather they resorted to vague or general sentences to quickly touch upon the topic and then gradually approached the subject from "surface to core" (Shen, 1989, p. 462).

In addition, 104 papers from CLEC and SWECCL written by non-English majors at different levels (freshmen to senior undergraduates) were carefully examined to further prove the hypothesis. Band 4 or Band 6 compositions are not included because a Chinese outline is usually provided in CET exams, which affects to a greater extent the examinees' own ways of organizing their papers.

Table 2 Theme summary of 104 papers from CLEC and SWECCL

First paragraph	Middle (Body)	End	No thesis
54 (51.9%) Clear 32 (30.7%) Vague 22 (21.1%)	11 (10.6%)	26 (25%)	13 (12.5%)

The results in table 2 show that only 32 students (30.7%) clearly pointed out a thesis statement at the beginning of their compositions; 48.1% of them delayed the themes till the later part or even to the end; 12.5% did not have a definite thesis statement at all. The results seem to echo the ones we had with students in HIT.

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During the interview, my students provided the following terms that help explain the reasons for indirectness strategies in their writing:

1. *yi jing*:	Poetic logic;
2. *yuwei*:	Aftertaste, chewy;
3. *yi zi zhi qian jin*:	One word worth 1,000 gold;
4. *bi hui*:	Practice in feudal times of avoiding violating the taboo of uttering the personal names of the emperor or elders;
5. *wen zi yu*:	Literary inquisition; literary crime;
6. *ping gan jue* :	Following one's intuition;
7. *sui xiang*:	Random thoughts;
8. *bo gu zheng jin*:	Conversant with things of the past to prove something modern;
9. *yan yi jian wei gui*:	Brevity is the soul;
10. *luo luo suo suo*:	Too wordy;
11. hua long dian jing	Paint the dragon and pinpoint the pupil.

Actually there is a legend behind the term hua long *dian jing* which describes a skillful painter who drew a dragon without the eyes. He added the eyes as the final stroke and then the dragon instantly became alive. The story is intended to teach Chinese writers how important the last stroke is to both a painting and writing. Students nowadays still hold fast to the phrase, believing that important things or speeches always come last.

Analyzing those terms, I found that the reasons for delaying a thesis statement could be categorized into the following types: reader responsibility, value of pithy/telegraphic language and political reason.

Hinds (1987) uses the term writer responsibility to describe some languages such as English, in which the person primarily responsible for effective communications is the speaker. Hinds cited Havelock that "the desire to write or speak clearly in English permeates our culture...With the emphasis on literacy both in classical Greece and in post-reformation England there was a great concern to make sentences say exactly, neither more nor less than what they meant." In Japanese, however, "the landmarks may be absent or attenuated since it is the reader's responsibility to determine the relationship between any one part of an essay and the essay as a whole" (p. 65).

Though Hinds places modern Standard Chinese nearer English, calling it a writer-responsible language, Scollon & Scollon (2000, p. 96) believe that "this assessment is based, however, on a comparison of a single Classical Chinese text and its present day translation, and generally speaking, Chinese in the modern period remains a more reader responsible language than English". Such phrases as chewy or aftertaste (*hui wei*), poetic logic (*yi jing*), dragon's eye (*hua long dian jing*) are still widely used in Chinese to make a comment on a composition, and often regarded as the basic elements of a good piece of writing. To fail to do otherwise would make one look unskilled, unworthy of respect as an academic (Snively, 1999, p. 26). The reason that *Dream of the Red Chamber* becomes one of the four Chinese Classic novels is because of its rich subtlety. Scholars for centuries still gain much pleasure out of savoring and fathoming the novel's telegraphic language. Students nowadays are encouraged to write an essay reaching a kind of *yi jing* to create a mental picture in the reader's mind. Although academic writing in China is at some remove from the literary tradition, students are still trained to be deeply respectful of the classics and such   writings   are   usually

considered well-written ones.

The general style of Chinese writing in classical times was extremely brief. Educated writers "share the feeling that the succinctness of the classical style carries with it an elegance and pithiness not found in the colloquial style, and inevitably slip into the classical style in their writing" (Li & Thompson, 1982, p. 87). Even today, written Chinese tend to be more condensed than spoken version. Thus, the style of brevity has a strong impact on students. The doctrine that "brevity is the soul" (*yan yi jian wei gui*) is still highly valued. The term *luo luo suo suo*, too wordy in explaining a subject in an unnecessary detail, is a common phrase not only used to comment on one's discourse but also serves more often than not as a criticism of the speaker/writer. One of my first-year students in HIT told me that he didn't consider the article *Public Attitudes Toward Science* written by Stephen Hawking in our textbook (Li & Thompson, 2002) a well written one. In his view, the content of the article is easy enough to understand that there is no need to extend such a simple idea into a three-page long article. Chinese writers have formed a habit of using condensed language and abstract terms believing that their reader is clever enough to fathom what they are trying say. It is considered an insult to the reader's intelligence by expounding everything to unnecessary length.

The other reason for being indirect is because politics "plays a far more important role in daily life than it does in the West and the essay in China has often been used as a tool of politics" (Zhang, 1999, p. 51). One can find *Wen zi yu*, crime for literacy, in almost every dynasty throughout Chinese history. Chinese people of letters know better than to speak out their own opinions and try to avoid anything related to politics. Fairclough (Scollon & Scollon, 2000, p. 117) makes the important point that, being determined by social structures, discourse has an effect on social structures and thus control over discourse is one factor that maintains power in the hands of the powerful. Chinese students, since childhood, are taught to avoid expressing their opinions directly, especially those related to politics. Therefore, they resort to a variety of indirect tools to avoid taking a political risk, such as use of analogy, metaphor, and formulaic phrases, which we will deal with below.

Indirectness in Information Sequencing

Indirectness in Chinese writing English also finds its expression in how information is sequenced. The Chinese language, as some grammarians point out, is a topic-prominent language in which topics "set a frame within which the sentence is presented" (Scollon & Scollon, 2000, p.117). Chinese people seldom put forward their main points at the beginning of a conversation. A framework about what to say is expected and hearers have formed a habit of foreshadowing the main point of a conversation based on the frameworks already presented by the speakers. Moreover, according to Flynn's (Scollon & Scollon, 2000, p. 18) Principle Branching Direction, Chinese can be described as a left branching language, which partly accounts for the preference for subordinate-main in clause sequencing. Peng (2000) found after a careful comparison of Chinese literary works and Contemporary American Literature that 84.28% of the subordinate clauses followed $\beta \rightarrow \mathrm{a}$ sequence. Here $\beta \rightarrow \mathrm{a}$ refers to subordinate-main sequence in which the subordinate clause precedes the main clause. Apparently, this way of sequencing information is often used in Chinese writing. When writing in English, Chinese ESL students follow this sequence even at a high level. Of all the 149 subordinate clauses in prize essays of College Student Writing Contest sponsored by the Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 86.6% of the subordinate clauses preceded

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the main. 65.5% of the causal clauses followed a because-therefore sequence.

It seems that Chinese people feel ill at ease when stating their opinion without providing enough background information. Sometimes, the "because" sentence serves as a framework providing background for the principal clause. When asked to write a sick-leave note, most students in my class write this way:

Dear Miss Fei,

Yesterday, my friends and I went to have a meal in a restaurant outside campus. Unfortunately, the food was not clean and I have a stomachache this morning. I am afraid I cannot come to class today. I have to go to see a doctor.
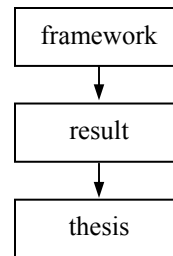
Please forgive me for my absence.

Name of the student
Date

The structure of the piece of writing is as follows:
The first sentence serves as a

The second sentence serves as the

The third is the

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┌─────────────┐
│  framework  │
└─────────────┘
       │
       ▼
┌─────────────┐
│   result    │
└─────────────┘
       │
       ▼
┌─────────────┐
│   thesis    │
└─────────────┘
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This way of sequencing, however, very often confuses a native English speaker who expects to find out the speaker's main point at the beginning of a conversation or a piece of writing, and is a challenge to the patience of an English speaker.

Shen (1989, p. 462) also found "from surface to core" is an essential rule for Chinese composition. The "surface to core" principle leads a writer to reach a topic gradually and systematically instead of "abruptly". Shen used her personal experience of writing English composition to illustrate that the way she organized her Chinese writing was different from the way she composed in English. Then why Chinese people have a different tradition of forming information?

The Chinese sage Confucius told his people two thousand years ago that "a gentleman does not talk about things he does not know and if names are not correct, they cannot be properly used (*Ming bu zheng ze yan bu shun*)" (Ding, 1999, p. 125). Therefore, to English speakers, Chinese people always beat around the bush, and to the Chinese, the concept of a topic sentence is like "the value of a busy people in an industrialized society rushing to get things done, hoping to attract and satisfy the busy reader very quickly" (Shen, 1989, p. 462).

Another important element underpinning the indirect way of writing of Chinese ESL learners is the role that *Li*, propriety, plays on Chinese society and culture. Li, as the core concept of Confucianism, has virtually become the "collective unconsciousness for the Chinese programming their social behavior including speech acts such as apologies, compliments, addressing, etc., as well as interactional rules, such as conversational principles, politeness principles, face work, etc" (Jia, 1999). The primary goal of Li was to "manage basic human relationships, to establish social harmony,   and to ensure the dictatorship of the

ruling class (Lin, 1999, p. 29)". Since expressing a personal view might be offensive to the ruler, the writer just elucidated in the entire essay what the sage said and he employed various indirect modes both to make his suggestions or requests and to be tactic enough not to offend his superior.

Recurrent Use of Indirect Modes

Chinese culture often appeared "seamless, mysterious and impenetrable" in the eyes of a westerner (Matalene, 1985, p. 790). One conspicuous element contributing to it has been the way Chinese people talk. It is reported that the Chinese rely greatly on rhetorical questions, metaphor and simile, formulaic phrasing, analogy and illustrative anecdotes, all of which Gregg (cited in Zhang, 1999) calls "indirect modes." The practice of using analogy and metaphor is still manifested in modern Chinese writing and is even manifested in English writing by Chinese learners.

Certainly, "all language users rely upon idioms, clichés, and set phrases, but Chinese seem always to rely upon them" (ibid, p. 793). When writing in English, Chinese students also bring this tradition with them. To the American reader, however, "the habit is atrocious" (Mao, 1997, p. 23). The American co-author of Mao's (1997) book *Student Compositions Examined* had this comment when she examined Chinese students compositions in this book: "'No pain; no gain' is a valuable thing to know, for it strengthens us to think about it during hard times. But to find it repeated in half the essays in a book gets tiresome." She suggested Chinese students "get rid of these tired, hackneyed clichés!"

Chinese not only frequently use those clichés, but they also rely on formulaic language. In particular they use one category: the four character phrase- *cheng yu*. As an English speaker would say, "a picture is worth 1000 words", a Chinese speaker might say "a word is like 1000 gold pieces." The formulaic language, according to Tsao (cited in Snively, 1999, p. 31), is "considered in Chinese as the height of culture and the mark of good breeding." The Chinese writer "delights both in sharing his or her erudition and in adding an extra meaning to the passage; the reader delights not only in recognizing the reference, but in the deeper appreciation and understanding of the messages conveyed by the reference."

The tradition of using formulaic language can enrich one's writing and sometimes condense the writing, as one well-chosen aphorism can be worth 1000 words of narrative. But Chinese ESL students often misuse or mistranslate those *cheng yu* and native speakers will be misled by those four-character phrases wondering why it is not stated directly instead of making a simple point complex.

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Conclusion

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To summarize, the above analysis has confirmed earlier findings (Scollon & Scollon, 2000; Jia, 2002) that indirectness strategies are employed in academic writings of Chinese EFL learners, especially in stating thesis statements, information sequencing and employing various indirect modes. Those Chinese terms also help us, to some extend, analyze indirectness strategies from a cultural perspective. Due to the limitation of the research methods, the paper cannot provide a comprehensive and conclusive understanding of Chinese EFL learners writing English. But from this study we get a glimpse of how indirectness strategies and markers are identified in English discourse by Chinese students.

Liebman (cited in Hinkel, 1997) states that NNSs who received writing instruction in L1 educational environmental setting may misinterpret the goals of the teaching of L2

composition. In the case of mainland China, students' individual need for English are hardly acknowledged; many teachers are predominantly concerned about teaching language knowledge and test-taking skills, instead of language skills for communication purposes (You, 2004). Therefore, it is especially essential that Chinese students "be taught how rhetorical and linguistic constructs can be employed in writing to further the goals with which composition is taught in English speaking environment" (Hinkel, 1997). Teachers may guide the students to realize the contrasts of discourses by NSs and those by them and integrate more western pedagogies into their own teaching.

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