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# A case study of college-level students' needs for English writing instruction

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A Thesis

Entitled

A Case Study of College-level Students' Needs for English Writing Instruction

By

Yan Zhang

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for

The Master of Arts in English

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Advisor: Melinda Reichelt

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Dr. Anthony Edgington

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College of Graduate Studies

The University of Toledo

August 2008

An abstract of

A Case Study of College-level Students' Needs for English Writing Instruction

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This thesis reports on a case study concerning Chinese student's needs for English writing instruction at Beijing Jiaotong University. Through survey and interviews, the study investigates the English writing instruction the subjects had received, their needs for English writing and expectation of English writing instruction. Moreover, the research examines the current situations in the writing instruction at the university analyzing the gaps between the students' need and the instructors' real practice. The results of the study indicate that the students need to learn some practical writing such as emails, CVs or statement of purposes and so on. They wish to improve sentence-level skills such as finding appropriate English expressions and developing ideas and wish the instructors focus on these in class accordingly. Besides, the students expect the instructors focus on word choice, content and organization instead of grammar issues. By comparing the students' survey and interviews with the instructors' interviews, it is suggested that the gap between the students' needs and the real practice is not very

serious. Possible explanations for the research results are discussed and implications for teaching are offered.

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Table of Contents

**Chapter One**

**Literature Review**

English is so extensively used many parts of the world (China included) that English instruction in general has become more intensively studied and various teaching pedagogies are being experimented with at various levels of schools. In 2002, In 2002, the Chinese Ministry of Education announced that English would become a required course starting from third grade (Liu & Braine, 2005). (Liu & Braine, 2005). In most curriculums in China, English writing is not a course but a part of comprehensive English courses which mostly cover listening, speaking, reading, writing and even translating. English instruction has mostly focused on grammar instruction and translation of Chinese sentences into English expressions, and writing skills have been ignored to some extent.

The turning point came in the year of 1989 when English writing became a required part of the university entrance exam (You, 2005) and hence began to be emphasized more in secondary schools. Now that the entrance exam to colleges is almost the only criterion for the admission to universities, any skills that will be tested in this exam will be practiced and studied intensively. Therefore, English writing started to be taken more seriously ever since then.

At the university level, all Chinese undergraduates are required to take English courses (Liu & Braine, 2005). College students have diversified needs for English writing. They may need to writing English emails to their friends who are native English

speakers; they need to publish academic papers in English, write business letters, create CVs, when hunting for jobs or write the statement of purpose when applying for universities in English-speaking countries. However, despite the fact that English writing instruction becomes increasingly important and highly demanded, Chinese students' English writing proficiency is tremendously inadequate.

Researchers have been endeavouring to find the sources of the deficiency of writing skills so as to find the solutions. Some studies focused on the differences of rhetoric (Kaplan, 1966) and the linguistic features of the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) (Mohan and Lo, 1985, Wang and Wen, 2002), and the effectiveness of some specific writing approaches in the English as Second Language (ESL) context when analyzing Chinese students' writing problems caused by using these approaches (Rao, 2007), but few studies explored the overall situations of the English as Foreign Language (EFL) writing instruction in China and the students' real demands for English writing instruction, especially at the college level.

In Chapter one, I will review literature on the problems of Chinese students' writing and attempted explanations, the experiment of new teaching approaches in China, the history of the EFL writing instruction in China, the current situations of tertiary-level writing instruction to non-English majors in China, and the writing requirements for non-English majors, as well as College English Tests (CET).

**The problems of Chinese students' writing and attempted explanations**

Some studies discuss and attempt to explain the writing problems of ESL students, with Chinese students as a large part of the population. Direct translation of sentences from their first language to the target language (Connor, 1996), using rhetoric

or logic of their own culture in English writing (Kaplan, 1966), lack of vocabulary, and inaccuracy of sentence structures are all common problems in Chinese students' writing.

According to Connor (1996), the common problems of ESL students' (including Chinese students) English writing are that even the advanced writers tend to translate their first language into English while writing and they realize finding the right words is the most difficult thing in writing. Connor further explains that this translation leads to 'recurring patterns of organization and rhetorical conventions reminiscent of writing in the students' native language and culture' (p. 5).

Kaplan (1966) originated the theory of contrastive rhetoric, which further explains this phenomenon. Based on the examination of 600 out of 700 ESL students' compositions, Kaplan proposes that writing patterns are culture-specific, which is a major reason for students' inadequate writing. He further explains that different cultures have different logic, so writers can not achieve good writing proficiency simply by relying on their L1 literacy and the syntactic knowledge they acquire as some other researches have intensively studied. He found that some "oriental" writings are characterized by "indirection" (p. 17). In other words, writers discuss a topic from different aspects but never address it directly, and the thesis is usually stated in the end instead of at the beginning. Kaplan (1966) thought that the indirectness of Chinese style of writing was influenced by the "eight-legged essays , which originated in ancient China and includes eight designated parts: the opening-up, amplification, preliminary exposition, first argument, second argument, third argument, final argument and the conclusion" (qtd. in Connor, 1996, p. 37).

Mohan and Lo (1985) disagree with Kaplan by stating that eight-legged essays were only one of the "variations allowed for centuries" (qtd. in Connor, 1996, p. 37) which was replaced by *baihua* style in the early twentieth century. During that time，directness was favored over indirectness at schools and the organizational pattern of modern Chinese writing was similar to that of English. Mohan and Lo (1985) also considered problems with grammar, syntax, and vocabulary as a developmental process which is similar when the ESL/ EFL learners learn their first language.

Matalene (1985) and Scollon (1911) support Kaplan's claim that indirectness is a characteristic of Chinese writing owing to a different view of self in Chinese culture. Matalene (1985) thinks that Chinese students delay giving argument or use ambiguous statements at the beginning. Moreover, according to Matalene (1985), the use of historical or religious texts seen as ornaments by Chinese was seen as distractions by western readers.

Another researcher, Cai (1993), proposes viewing these problems from the cultural and sociopolitical aspects. He explains that the prevailing social and political ideology in ancient Chinese was "social stability harmony and political dictatorship" (p. 5). That's why individuality was not encouraged and all writing had to conform to the strictly fixed organizational pattern, *ba-gu-wen* (eight-legged essays). Individuals were not allowed to express personal ideas and writing was characterized by indirectness. He believes that the influence of the eight-legged essay principle still cannot be ignored. He also introduces that, instead of expressing personal views, Chinese writers refer to classical or authoritative texts to show their intelligence and respect for authorities. Chinese writers express their ideas indirectly by using rhetorical questions, analysis and

4

so on. Thus, ESL teachers should take into consideration the aforementioned sociopolitical, ideological and cultural values held by Chinese ESL students, not simply claiming that Chinese students are poor writers due to "indirectness", "digression", "loosely developed topics" and "lack of transitional signals" (p. 2). From these different voices, it is apparent that Kaplan's explanation is not adequate to explain the writing problems of Chinese students.

Besides contrastive rhetoric, many studies also attempt to find other factors influencing Chinese students' writing. Wang and Wen (2002) investigated how Chinese EFL writers used their native language when composing L2 written works and how such L1 use was affected by their English proficiency and writing tasks. The main findings of their study revealed that the EFL writers tended to rely on L1 when managing their writing process, generating and organizing ideas. Moreover, as the L2 proficiency of writers increased, the L1 use decreased, but the extent to which the L1 use decrease varied across writing tasks.

Moreover, writing instruction has also had an effect on students' writing. Hao & Sivell (2002) argue that isolating reading and writing instruction hinders the improvement of students' writing abilities. They believe reading and writing proficiency are closely interrelated and therefore suggest intergrading reading and writing in ESL writing instruction in order to help students contextualize the topics they are supposed to write about. They also mention that this "reading-plus-writing process" (p. 6) will lead to the redefinition of the instructor's role and the redesign of curriculum, which will "be very worthwhile in China though seems difficult. The "pedagogies will be more time-consuming and challenging" (p. 6)

**The experiment with new teaching approaches in China**

Despite many studies on the linguistic differences of L1 and L2, and cultural differences, little research has been conducted into the impact of instructional factors on Chinese students' writing, especially in the EFL environment. You (2004) introduces that "English instruction in non-English-dominant countries have been influenced by the theories and pedagogies of English-dominant countries" (p. 97).

Before discussing the teaching approaches being experimented with in China, it is necessary to review some major ones in English writing instruction. First, the product-based approach, which is text-oriented (Hyland 2002), is inclined to emphasize the text from its 'orderly arrangement of words, clauses and sentences' (ibid). Writers are presumed to be able to 'encode a full semantic representation of their intended meanings' (Hyland 2002, p. 7) simply by applying correct forms. Students are projected to write for teachers or for the evaluation of their mastery of linguistic knowledge, in which their final products are analyzed towards the accuracy and clarity of the vocabulary, grammar, syntax and mechanics (Pincas, 1982b).

Then, there is the process-based approaches which are writer-oriented (Hyland, 2002), and assume writing as a "non-linear, exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning" (Zamel, 1983, p.165). A main feature of writing process is identified as "a record of an idea developing" (Shaughnessy, 1977, p. 234) rather than an outcome of that well-formed idea.

The third approach to teaching writing is genre-based approach, which is reader-oriented and emphasize linguistic knowledge (Hyland, 2002). It is perceived to arise 'as a

response to the inadequacy of the process approach' and an extension of the product approach. Based on the systemic linguistic model (Halliday *et al.* 1964), the notion of genre is defined in various ways and is still controversial. Another important approach to writing instruction is the combination of process and genre which incorporates complex interrelationships among various elements such as the writer, the reader, the text and reality (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996) as a whole.

Another approach to teaching writing is the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) approach, which deals with "the use of English in study settings (particularly but not exclusively in higher education) where the main goal of language learning is the ability to cope with the student's chosen academic specialism" (Johnson & Johnson, 1998, p. 105). EAP has two divisions: English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP).

You (2004) mentions that some approaches such as "process approaches, genre-based approach, and writing for academic purposes approach" (p. 98) from America are being tested in Chinese classrooms and that concepts in the instruction of ESL writing are broadly used in EFL writing research in China. Wang (1986) formally introduced the process approach into the Chinese English teaching circle (qtd in You, 2004, p. 99). However, the teachers have to readjust some of the methods to suit the "local needs and constraints" (You, 2004, p. 98).

Little research was conducted into the effectiveness of some of the approaches applied in the Chinese EFL context. Rao (2007) described a study conducted on 118 Chinese sophomore participants about the efficacy of training in brainstorming strategies on students' writing proficiency as well as their attitudes toward this strategy. It was

concluded that brainstorming was effective and the students felt positive toward this strategy. Based on these findings, he further recommended that brainstorming strategies should be adopted in the EFL classrooms in order for students to better create and organize ideas. Rao also indicates that College teachers should adopt a process-oriented approach instead of simply teaching students do "correct" writing, giving them more opportunities to explore and expand ideas, to interact with each other.

Yang, Badger *et al* (2006) compared the effectiveness of teacher feedback and peer feedback, drawing the conclusion that teacher feedback was more effective and resulted in better improvement than peer feedback. They also found that the usefulness of peer feedback was acknowledged by most students. Gray (2007) discussed the effectiveness of error corrections in the EFL context and suggested teachers stopping it, for there was no evidence at all showing error correction helped improve sentence accuracy or other aspects of writing.

**The history of EFL writing instruction at college-level in China**

The exploration of the current writing instruction in China entails the review of the brief history of EFL writing instruction. Systematic English writing instruction at college-level institutions could be dated back to the twentieth century in China. As You (2005) indicates English was regarded as a strong tool for the Chinese to access Western learning so as to build a "strong nation" (p. 6).

English writing was initially a part of comprehensive English courses. Thus, to discuss the history of EFL writing instruction, the brief history of English instruction has to be mentioned. In "EFL Composition in China", George Xu (1989) presented the

history of EFL instruction in China more from a political aspect, but he still gave as a glimpse of that period in history.

According to him, in the, in most stated-owned universities, English was not as popular as Russian. Under the influence of the (former) Soviet Union, the grammar-translation approach was widely used with the aim of "reinforcing grammatical structures, vocabulary and usage" (p. 2). The written work produced by the students focused on sentence structures and was characterised by Dvorak (1986) as "transcription rather than composition" (qtd in Xu, 1989, p. 2). Xu (1989) also introduced that in the late fifties, influenced by the "Big Leap Forward" (p. 5) movement in China, students were encouraged to memorize long list of words, believing that it could increase their efficiency in learning the language. Rote learning was so prevalent that the concerns for discourse were largely ignored.

Moreover, Xu (1989) also mentioned that because of the current political situations, students did not dare to include works written by English-speaking authors, which would be considered capitalism and would have severe impact on their political life. Instead, they had to repeat the translated slogans and phrases from Chinese political documents. In the early sixties, according to Xu (1989), The Chinese authorities intended to replace the grammar-translation approach with audio-lingual approach. This reform was not successful due to many factors, but it did result in the consequence of further ignoring writing instruction. In the earlier eighties, the grammar-translation approach was still predominant in China (Fisher-Kohn, 1986; Scovel, 1983, qtd, in Xu, 1989, p. 7) and this could be proved by the evidence that the assigned textbooks for English majors were typically characterized by grammar explanations and translation of sentences.

**The current situations of tertiary-level writing instruction to non-English**

**majors in China**

When it comes to the current writing instruction in China, few studies have explored the instruction for non-English majors. As You (2004) indicates in his "New Directions in EFL writing: A Report from China", a reform of English Language Teaching is going on under the influence of "Teaching Requirements for College English Curriculum", which was published by the Chinese Ministry of Education in January 2004 (2004, p. 254). Moreover, in another article written by You "The choice made from no choice": English writing instruction in a Chinese university" (2004), he gives us a glimpse of the writing instruction in tertiary level institutions. You (2004) provides a detailed description of the class he observed. In this university, writing is taught as a separate skill independent of reading, speaking and listening. He found from the classroom observation that the instruction was strongly affected by the College English Test (CET)-Band 4, a test designed by the Ministry of Education to test whether the requirements of the national syllabus for non-English majors are met.

He also mentioned that there were many barriers to teachers adopting western pedagogical approaches. They had to actually "make their choices from no choice" (p. 108). Furthermore, he pointed out large class size, teachers' low social and economic status and the schools' concentration on the CET tests were all obstacles to the progress of writing instruction. Despite these obstacles, some teachers are experimenting with some new approaches to writing instruction such as the afore-mentioned Western ones while still accommodating the CET. Hopefully, with the increasing demand for better writing skills, the raising status of English teachers, and their exposure to new

pedagogical approaches, more and more teachers are willing to and encouraged to explore new and effective approaches that are suitable for the Chinese EFL context.

## The writing requirements for non-English majors

In the national syllabus for non-English majors, requirements for writing are specified.

Students should be able to write a 120-150 word essay on a given topic or an outline in thirty minutes. Besides, they should be able to write short letters and notes in which they can articulate the meaning without significant linguistic errors. The relatively advanced requirement is being able to write a 150-180 word essay in English based on certain topics, outlines, tables or pictures in thirty minutes. Also, students should be able to do practical writings such as letters and CVs with complete content, clear organization and coherent logic. (College English Syllabus Revision team, 1999, *translation mine*)

The CET tests were designed and CET 4 was required for graduation by the Ministry of Education to test whether these requirements are met. The test aims to examine whether students have met the requirements in the College English syllabus, which is a criterion-related norm-referenced test. The syllabus indicates,

College English instruction aims to help students develop relatively strong reading ability, certain listening comprehension ability and preliminary speaking and writing ability, which enable students to acquire subject-related information with English as a tool. (CET Committee, 1999, *translation mine*)

Therefore, this test mainly examines students' ability to use the language and the mastery of grammar structure and vocabulary. For the writing part,

Students need to be able to write a 100-120 word essay (in English) on a given topic, scenario or pictures, topic sentences, or keywords in thirty minutes. Students should be able to correctly and coherently express ideas on topics about daily life or common knowledge without significant mistakes. (CET Committee, 1999, *translation mine*)

This part aims to "examine students' preliminary ability to express ideas in written English" .The writing part accounts for 15 points in this 100-scale test. 60 points is the passing grade. Students' achievement is measured almost exclusively by students' performance on the CET test (Li, 2007). Correct form is emphasized over development of thoughts (Standardized test design team, 1994, qtd. in You, 2004).

Though many studies investigage the influence of linguistic differences, cultural differences and the effectiveness of some new teaching approaches that are adopted in China, few efforts are devoted into the in-depth study of the Chinese students' real needs for writing instruction and how college writing instructors can adjust to these needs. My research aims to analyze the real needs of college students, the current teaching approaches used by the instructors and find how these approaches can meet their real-life demands through a case study at Beijing Jiaotong University in China.

**Chapter Two**

**Research Methodology**

**Introduction**

With the ever-increasing demand for better English-language writing proficiency when students pursue further study in overseas institutes and hunt for a job in the highly competitive job market in China, English writing instruction in China has been studied more intensively and has undergone significant changes. Though English is a required course starting from the early stage of schooling in China, writing has been ignored to some extent. It was only when writing became a part of the university entrance exam in 1989 (You, 2005) that it was taught seriously at various levels of schools. More and more studies have been devoted to the improvement of writing instruction and teachers have started experimenting new approaches in classrooms in China.

However, although instructors in China make every effort to improve teaching approaches, there still seems to be a gap between what teachers teach and the students' real needs for writing instruction. For example, some students need or want more instruction on practical writing but the instruction only focuses on academic writing such as persuasive or descriptive writing. The students may need more feedback on content and organization, but the instruction focuses more on grammar explanation, word choice, and so on. Given that few studies are concerned with the current writing

instruction and  the students' real needs at tertiary-level institutes in China, I attempt to conduct a case study at a university about the what students' real needs for writing instruction are and how the instructors teach writing in their classes. Finally, the research intends to find out what the students' expectations for English writing instruction are and how college-level pedagogies can be adjusted to better satisfy their real-life demands.

**Context**

The research was done at Beijing Jiaotong University. This university was selected because it is one of the top universities both in Beijing, the capital city, and in China which has a large student population. Moreover, I am acquainted with some of the instructors and students, which is easy for me to conduct the research.

Beijing Jiaotong University, formerly named North China Jiaotong University, is a comprehensive university located in the Haidian District of Beijing. It a national university established by the Ministry of Railroads and the Ministry of Education, and is under direct supervision of the Ministry of Education. Consisting of nine schools and having a student population of approximately 13,664 and a faculty of more than 1,582 professors, among whom 85% has a master's or higher degree, the university is one of the top universities in China and attracts thousands of students nation wide (Introduction about Beijing Jiaotong University, Web page accessed 10 p.m. EST, May 10th, 2008, http://www.njtu.edu.cn/xrld/xyjj.htm, *translation mine*).

A survey about the students' writing experiences and needs was conducted in College English classes on two groups of students majoring in Civil Engineering and

Electronic Information. The students are all required to take College English One in the first academic year and College English Two in the second year. In each year, there are two semesters of College English offered. A flexible curriculum in this university allows the students to take either College English Two or Business English if the students have achieved certain proficiency level when studying College English One. College English is the English course designed for non-English majors and is worth four credit hours each semester. The students have two fifty-minute sessions each week. At the end of the second year, they can choose to take the CET 4 test, that is, the Band Four College English Test for non-English majors, in order to have a proof of their English proficiency which will benefit them in job-hunting when they graduate.

**Participants**

The student participants are second-year college students majoring in civil engineering and electronic information aged from nineteen to twenty. They are required to take College English classes, and the survey was conducted in the classes of College English Two. The two classes were randomly chosen and all participants were volunteers. I collected fifty questionnaires. The percentage of male to female students is five to one at that university and there were approximately thirty eight male participants and twelve female participants in my research. Five volunteer students were randomly selected who agreed to have telephone interviews with me. These interviewees happened to be five female students majoring in Electronic Engineering and they had done the survey previously.

As for the instructors interviewed, two of the instructors are my colleagues at a language school, where they also teach pre-IELTS (the acronym for the International

English Language Testing System) courses part-time. Another instructor is one of the aforementioned instructor's colleagues who also teach English in the same department at Beijing Jiaotong University.

**Research design**

In order to examine the students' real needs and the instructors' teaching approaches to find how the writing instruction can better match these needs, I chose to administer a survey and interviews at Beijing Jiaotong University. My research questions were:

1. What are the students' real needs for English writing instruction at Beijing Jiaotong University?

2. What are the real situations in the current writing instruction at Beijing Jiaotong University?

3. How can the writing instruction be adjusted to satisfy the students' needs?

The questionnaire was designed to elicit information about the background of the students' previous writing instruction, the students' real needs for writing pedagogies and the current writing pedagogies used by the instructors in their program. The students' questionnaire was divided into two parts; the first part was about the background, and the second part about their needs.

Before the real questionnaires were distributed, I conducted a pilot survey on some of my own students I taught at the Global IELTS School in Beijing and made some modifications. The final version of the survey can be found in the appendix.

Previously, I had included some short-answer questions, but had to replace them with multiple-choice questions, because some students simply left these questions

blank, telling me they did not know what to write. For some questions such as "What do you think your writing problems are," some checked all the answers claiming they had all the problems listed, so I had to limit the number of answer to three at most. There were also a few confusing questions that I had to revise based on my students' feedback. Moreover, since some of the students were not willing to read English questions, and I hoped the students could understand the questions accurately, I added the Chinese translations to each question. I also required them to answer all the questions in Chinese so that I could exactly understand what they really meant. As for the interview questions for the instructors, I only requested one instructor who also teaches English but not at Beijing Jiaotong Univeristy to help me with the pilot interview and revised the questions based on his response.

As far as the interviews are concerned, it was hard to find enough interviewees at first. The university was preparing for the nationwide evaluation of the comprehensive qualities, so both students and instructors were very busy. Fortunately, I managed to find five volunteers for my interview. I used the same questions from the survey, asking respondents to elaborate on their answers.

**Data collection and procedure**

I first administered questionnaires with student participants to obtain general information and then carried out interviews with volunteer students and instructors to gain more detail.

I first prepared fifty copies of the questionnaires and consent forms and my friend, who is also an instructor at that university, took me to his classes. I first introduced the purpose of this study and emphasized the survey was on a voluntary

basis and was completely confidential. Then, I distributed the questionnaires and gave the students twenty minutes to fill them out. In the meantime, some asked questions about some items and I answered them in Chinese. After about twenty minutes, I collected both the consent forms and the questionnaires. I repeated the same process in the second class and finally collected fifty copies.

The interviews were conducted over the telephone. As I said previously, both students and instructors were busy preparing the evaluation event, it was convenient and less time-consuming for them to participate in telephone interviews. I interviewed five volunteer students and three instructors. After setting up the interview time with them and preparing a blank questionnaire, I asked the interviewees to elaborate their answers to the questionnaires they had done. Each interviews lasted approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin and recorded and transcribed into English.

### Analysis of survey data and interview data

Survey data and interview data were analyzed separately. The results of the survey were tabulated and are presented in the following order :1) the background of the students' writing instruction, 2) the students' needs for English writing and writing instruction, and 3) the problems in writing and the students' expectations for writing instruction. Under each category, the results of major survey questions are presented in detail.

The interviews with the students and instructors were analyzed separately. The students' interviews were transcribed and summarized and broken into the aforementioned aspects to provide further explanation of the survey answers. In each

aspect, the detailed interview questions and summary of answers were presented after the results of the survey. The interviews with the instructor were also summarized and broken into two categories: 1) the students' needs for English writing and writing instruction, and 2) the problems in writing and the students' expectations for writing instruction. In each category, the interview results were presented in the same order as the students' interview questions and were presented after the summary of the students' interviews to show the gap or correspondence in each aspect.

The next chapter is devoted to the summary and discussion of the findings and description of pedagogical implications of these findings.

**Chapter Three**

**Discussion and Implications**

In chapter one, I reviewed the literature concerning EFL writing instruction in China. I analyzed the problems in Chinese students' writing, theories attempting to explain these problems, new approaches being tested in this EFL environment, and the current situations of English writing instruction in China. In chapter two, I described my research methodology in detail, explaining how I conducted the survey and interviews. In this chapter, I will present the findings of the survey and interview, based on which I will discuss my research questions. Furthermore, I will discuss the implications for teaching.

**Findings**

This study aims to investigate three research questions: 1) What are the students' real needs for English writing instruction at Beijing Jiaotong University? 2) What are the real situations in the current writing instruction at Beijing Jiaotong University? 3) How can the writing instruction be adjusted to satisfy the students' needs? I will report the answers of the first two research questions in this section and discuss the third question in the section of implications for teaching. Before reporting the students' needs for English writing instruction, I will also report the background information concerning the writing instruction the students had received, which may conduce to the understanding of their current needs. In this part, no instructor interviews are involved. Then, I will present the students' needs for writing instruction

from the aspects of 1) the students' needs for English writing and the problems in writing and 2) the students' expectations for writing instruction.

## The background of the students' writing instruction

In the investigation of the background of the English writing instruction, it is shown that English writing has never been an independent course for non-English majors in this university. If the students had had any form of writing instruction, the top three foci are "instruction of how to find appropriate words", "instruction of how to appreciate good readings and learn from the reading" and "explanation of grammar rules and translation of sentences". The interviews with the students further indicate that the teachers sometimes analyzed good sample writing in class, telling the students the strengths and weaknesses for them to imitate the style of writing or good sentence patterns. Moreover, grammar and vocabulary explanations had always been the foci of writing instruction. The students also indicated that the teacher had them read English writing, highlighting good words that might be useful in future writing tasks, explaining their usage, making sentences with them and having the students translate some Chinese sentences into English.

The summary of the interviews suggests that most writing instruction stressed sentence-level writing skills. As for the feedback they had received, grammar correction and feedback on content and organization were the two common types and most teachers simply underlined errors and sometimes corrected them on the paper. When it comes to content and organization, the interviews with the students show that the teacher would comment on content or organization only when irrelevant information was included or

the paragraphs were seriously ill-developed. More in-depth feedback on logical order between sentences was seldom covered.

**The foci of the writing instruction the students had received**

The first part of the questionnaire asks about the background information concerning what kind of writing instruction the students had ever received. None of the students had had independent writing courses. Asked the foci of the any form of writing instruction received, 30/50 chose "instruction of how to find appropriate words", 20/50 chose "explanation of grammar rules and translation of sentences", 20/50 chose "instruction of how to appreciate good readings and how to learn from these readings", 17/50 chose "instruction of how to develop ideas", 16/50 chose "instruction of how to write more complex sentences", 16/50 chose "instruction of how to use templates and sentence patterns to prepare for various essay tests" and 15/50 chose "instruction of how to organize ideas".
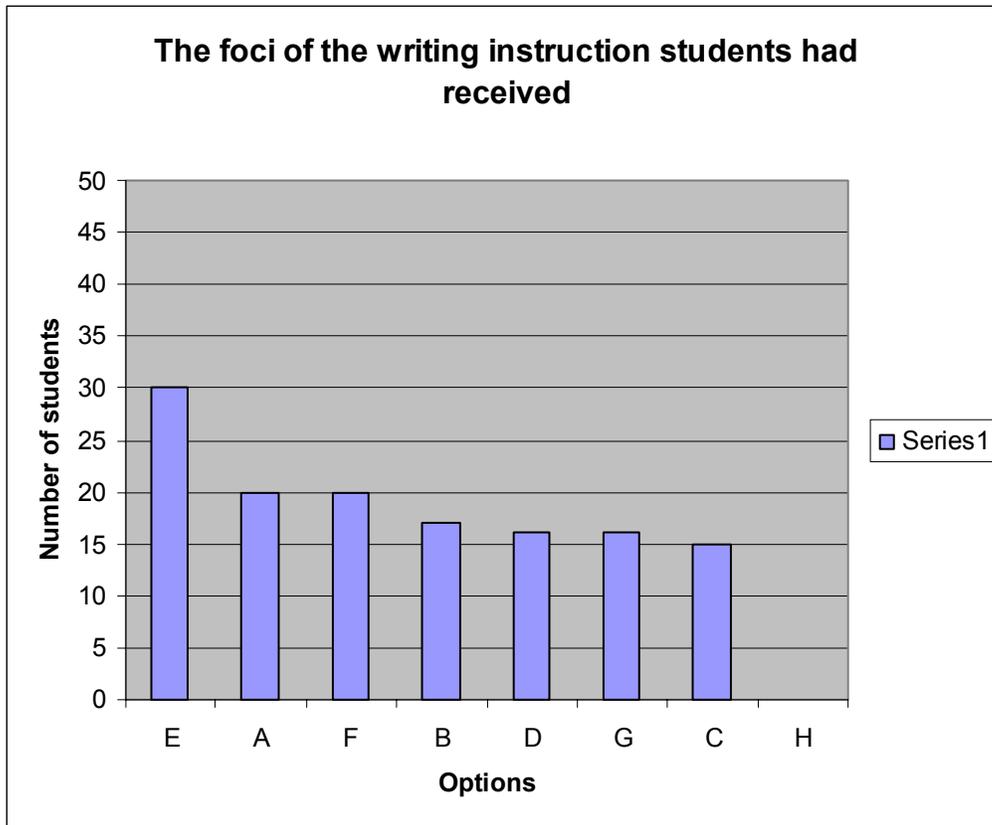
## The foci of the writing instruction students had received



A. explanation of grammar rules translation of sentences
B. instruction of how to develop ideas
C. instruction of how to organization ideas
D. instruction of how to write more complex sentences
E. instruction of how to find appropriate words
F. instruction of how to appreciate good readings and how to learn from these readings
G. instruction of how to use templates and sentence patterns to prepare for various essay tests
H. other_____

In the interviews with the five students, none of the interviewees reported having had any independent writing courses before or after entering university. One student said, "I do wish to have such classes, but the schedule for my major-related classes is already too tight. I am afraid neither the teacher nor I can fit this into the class schedule especially when I do not need English writing very urgently. If English writing class is offered, I hope it is more related to my major instead of teaching different genres in general." Other

students simply told me they did not have such classes and they did not need them either. When asked about the foci of the writing instruction they had received, four out of the five students said their teachers focused more on grammar errors and other sentence-level problems such as the logic within a sentence structure or word choice. For example, one student said, "My teachers focused on the accuracy and complexity of sentences, how to find appropriate words, and how to write grammatically correct sentences. They often expanded vocabulary for us by having us read some good sentences and paragraphs from a reading, and then asked us to memorize and imitate these sentence structures." Another student said the teacher taught them how to understand essay topics and identify the type of writing. Moreover, the teachers would teach them some sentence patterns and some transitional words. Only one student said the teachers focused more on organization and content. She told me that in high school, the teachers would give sample writing and analyze why the writing was good from the aspect of sentence structure or organization. Now, in college, the writing instruction focused on how to write logically and how to organize ideas. When asked about writing complex sentences or finding appropriate words, she answered, "Sentence structures and grammar aspects were stressed before, so they are not emphasized now. Word choice is covered more often." Moreover, she said, "Transitional words or sentences instead of templates are taught, but they are not the foci of the writing instruction."

**The form of feedback the students' had received**

When asked about how their writing was commented on, 27/50 chose "feedback on content and organization", 25/50 chose "grammar correction", 14/50 chose "feedback on coherence and logic" and 14/50 chose "feedback on word choice".
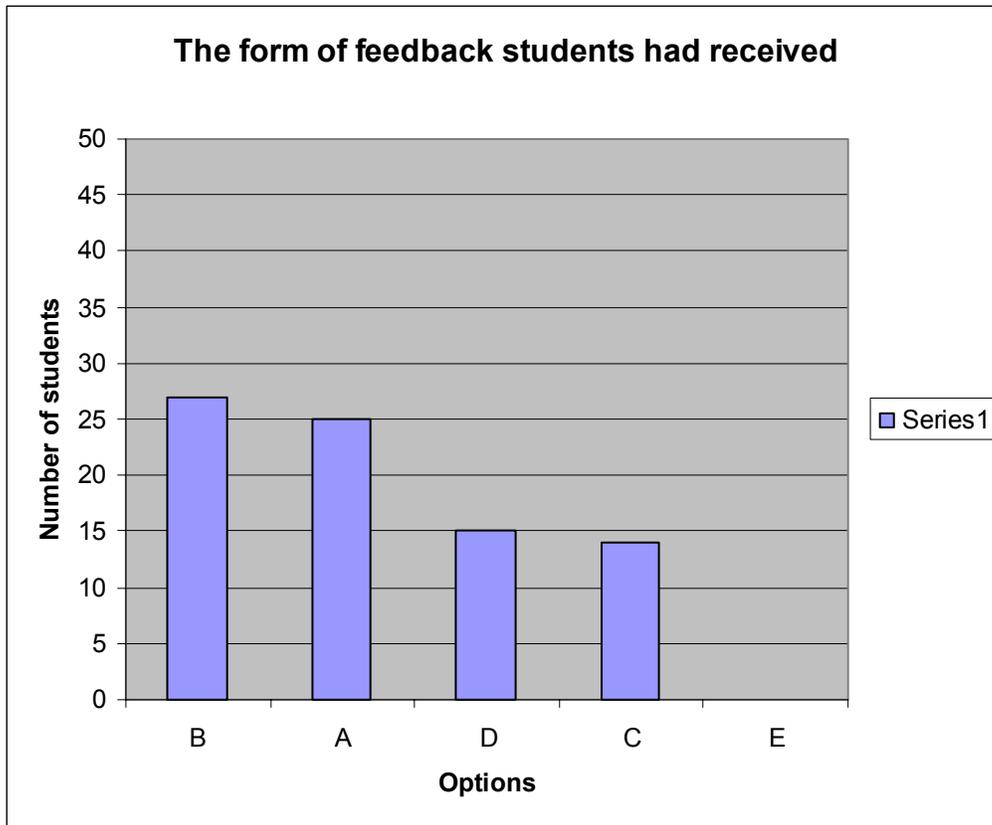
## The form of feedback students had received



A. grammar correction
B. feedback on content and organization
C. feedback on coherence and logic
D. feedback on word choice
E. other_____

In the interviews, when asked how their teachers gave feedback, most said that grammar correction was the most common form of feedback. One student said the teachers would give feedback on organization and underline problematic sentences. Sometime the teacher would point out the lack of logic between sentences. Another student said, "My teachers usually underline incorrect sentences or inaccurate words. Some errors are corrected, and some will be underlined and left for self-correction." One student said their teachers would often correct grammar problems on their writing and

still talk about the common problems in the organization to the whole class, which she thought very helpful.

## The students' needs for English writing

The second part of the questionnaire lays out a clear picture of the students' real need for English writing instruction. Firstly, their audience and purpose of writing correspond to each other. Test raters and English teachers are the top two audience and their purposes of learning English writing are to pass tests or look for a job. In the interviews, it is revealed that the tests they mentioned were CET 4, CET 6 or other international English language tests. The students admitted the necessity of learning English writing, which might add credits to their qualifications when looking for a job or applying for a university in an English speaking country, but they thought their major-related courses were already too overwhelming, so they could not put too much time and effort in English writing. Out of the academic context, whether they needed English writing depended on what they did after they graduated. If they continued higher education, the answer would be "yes". If they started to work, academic writing might not be useful.

Concerning the form of writing they needed, the survey shows practical writing such as writing CVs, emails and so on, is the top one. The interview reveals more. If only for passing tests, the students needed argumentative and descriptive writing, in other words, academic writing. However, not everyone plans to write a paper in the future, so practical writing would be more useful especially when hunting for a job. Another reason for little desire to learn argumentative and descriptive writing was that they had been learning these two types of writing for very long time. They had been very familiar with

the format and did not need to learn. But for practical writing, they needed to learn specific formats.

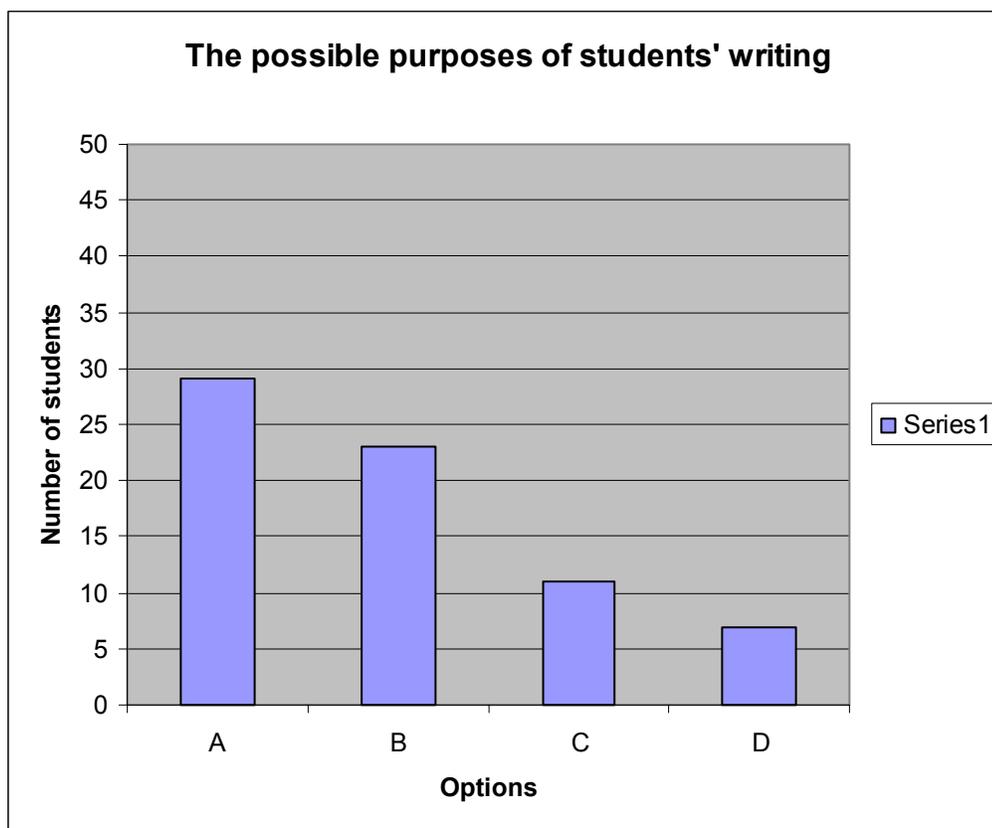**The possible audience of the students' writing and the purposes of learning English writing**

When asked the possible audience of their English writing, 25/50 of the students chose professors in China or simply indicated English teachers and 20/50 of the students indicated that they wrote for various test raters. 9/50 chose "other" as their answer. Some indicated the audience might be their relatives or friends that could only communicate with them in English; others indicated the possible audience of their English writing was themselves. Only one of the fifty students answered the possible audience were the professors in English speaking countries.
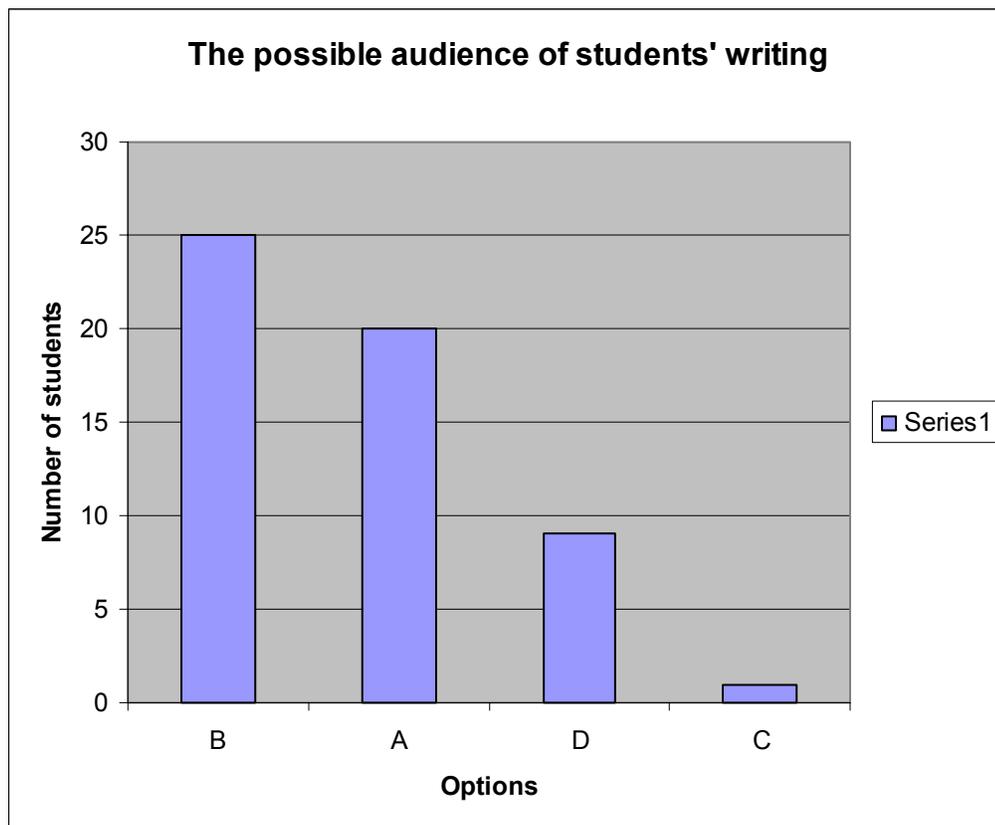
A. raters of English tests such as CET, TOEFL or other
B. professors in China
C. professors in an English speaking country
D. other_____

The second part of the questionnaire asks about the purposes of learning English writing. First, most students, i.e., 36/50 indicated that they did not need academic writing outside the academic context. Among the rest of the students who answered "yes", seven of them wrote "when writing academic papers or when writing abstracts for their papers written in Chinese" (An English abstract is required when submitting papers even if they are written in Chinese). Two students indicated they needed academic writing when they prepared for the TOEFL and GRE or other English tests which were not required by their school curriculum. Three students said they might need academic writing such as argumentative writing in their future work. Besides, two students answered "yes", but did not indicate in which context they would need academic writing. For the question about their purposes of learning English writing, 29/50 students chose "to pass tests," 23/50 thought they learned English writing "to look for a job," 11/50 students said they need to improve their English writing to "study or live abroad" (in an English-speaking country). 7/50 students chose "other" and they offered various answers. One student wrote the purpose of learning English writing because s/he wanted "to follow the current trend (of learning English). Another said s/he just wanted to master the art of English writing so that s/he could better learn a culture and better communicate with people who wrote in English. There was also one student saying s/he simply enjoyed learning it. The rest of them offered purposes such as "to master a language", "to increase personal skills, or "solely for the purpose of study itself".

## The possible purposes of students' writing

**Number of students** (y-axis: 0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50)

**Options** (x-axis): A, B, C, D

Legend: ■ Series1

(Bar values approximately: A = 29, B = 23, C = 11, D = 7)

A. to pass tests
B. look for a job
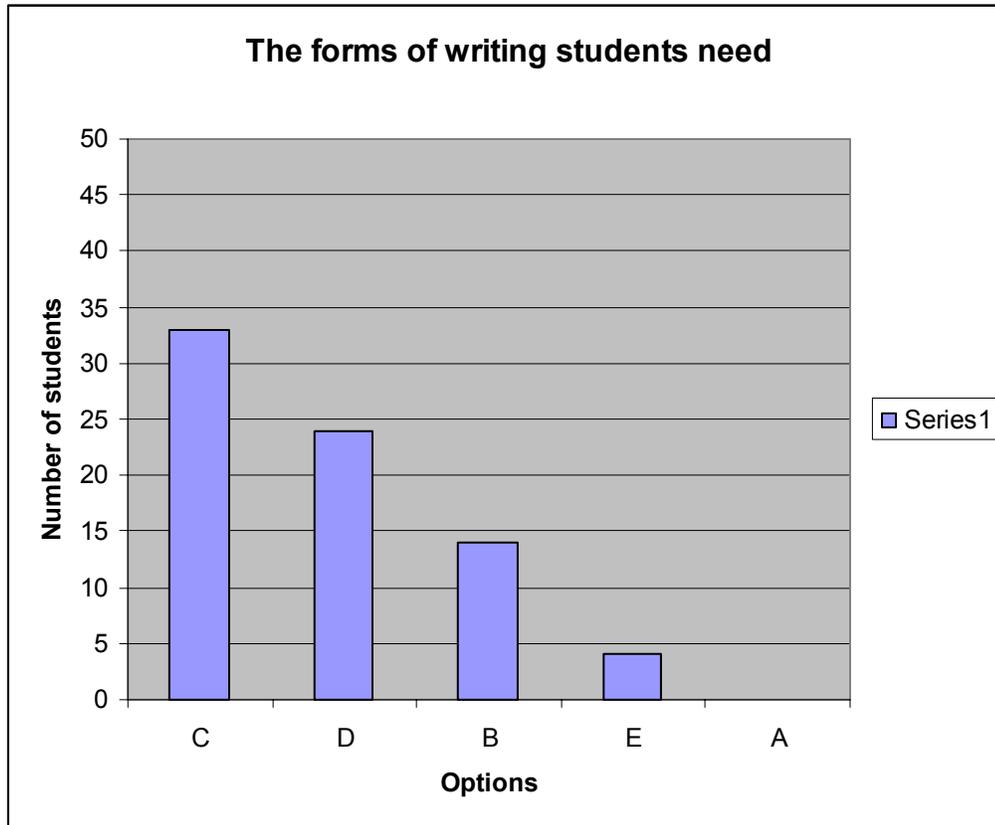C. study or live in an English-speaking country
D. other_____

In the interviews with the students, talking about the audience of their writing, they all told me that, at school, they only wrote for their English teachers and learned English writing for passing tests including unit tests for their courses as well as CET 4 and CET 6. However, they did admit learning English writing would be useful in the future. For example, if they wanted to have further study, they might need to write academic papers in English. If they found a job in a multi-national company, they might need English writing such as English emails, CVs or technical reports and analysis. None of the interviewees said they would learn English writing to study or live in an English-speaking country, but when asked, they did say that was a possibility. One student told

me that except for writing for English teachers, she also wrote journals in English simply for keeping down what she thought to be memorable. Another student told me she textmessaged her Chinese friends in English with the aim of learning more English expressions.

In the interviews with the instructors, they all had similar opinions with the students. They all admitted that English teachers and test-raters were the major audience of their students' writing and the main purpose was to pass tests. They also agreed that some students might have further demand for English writing when they graduate.

**The forms of writing the students need**

As for the forms of writing the students need, 33/50 chose "practical writing", 24/50 chose "descriptive writing", 14/50 students chose "persuasive writing", and 4/50 chose "other". Four of the five students who chose "other" wrote "all" in the blank I offered indicating that they needed all the forms of writing I listed. Only one student indicated that s/he needed to learn technical writing that might be useful in his/her academic major. None of the students chose "poems or novels".

**The forms of writing students need**

Number of students

50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0

C  D  B  E  A

Options

Series1

A. poems, novels
B. persuasive writing
C. practical writings such as letters, CVs,
D. descriptive writing
E. other

In the interviews with the students, all five interviewees thought they needed

practical writing such as CVs, letters, emails, and so on. One told me that she thought

practical writing required special formats so they had to learn how to follow the formats.

But for persuasive or descriptive writing, they had been learning these since they started

learning English. She thought she only needed to find supportive ideas and organize them

without worrying about the rhetoric, so it was not very difficult to write these two types

of writing. Moreover, all interviewees mentioned they needed major-related writing

instruction which would benefit them when they wrote academic papers. One student told

me that, at school, they had to learn persuasive or descriptive writing, but if they did not continue study after graduation, they did not need such writing.

In the interviews with the instructors, they talked about the possible audience, purposes of English writing and the needed form of writing together. They shared the same ideas with the students concerning these aspects.

The first instructor interviewee said, "At school, the students mainly write for tests, in other words, write for teachers and test raters. After they graduate, they may need English writing for work, but since the students do not know for sure they need and the pressure from other courses are heavy, they do put English writing on their top priority." Argumentative and descriptive writing were the main types of writing being tested, so the students mainly needed instruction on these two. He also mentioned that argumentative writing did not always offer outlines in some major English tests, so the students should learn how to develop their own ideas.

The second instructor interviewee stated the students only wrote for test raters and teachers at school. "They may not need these types of writing (academic writing such as argumentative and descriptive writing) after they graduate, but the skills of writing grammatically correct sentences and of writing logically coherent paragraphs are more beneficial to their future study or work," she said.

The third instructor interviewee thought, at school, the students only wrote for raters of English tests such as CET, TOEFL or other. When they graduated, they might also need English writing if their jobs require. He thought most of his students learned writing only to pass various tests or prepare for future jobs.

In summary, for the form of writing the students need, the students and instructors shared similar perspective. They all held argumentative and descriptive writing were what the students needed to learn when at school. The only difference is that the students thought they needed to learn more practical writing such as writing CVs, letters, statements of purposes and so on besides academic writing.

**The problems in writing and the students' expectations for writing instruction**

The survey shows that students think "lack of vocabulary", "lack of sentence complexity" and grammar errors" are the top three problems in the students' English writing. The students thought they almost had all the problems listed, but most thought that lack of ideas, lack of English expressions and sentence complexity were very serious problems. Moreover, it is indicated that "fluency of sentences", "choice of vocabulary" and "organization of ideas" are the top three skills they want to improve. The number of students who chose "development of ideas" is very close to those who chose "organization of ideas", which indicates they are of similar importance to the students. This data clearly indicates that it is apparent that students still wanted to improve sentence-level skills most. In the interviews, the students further explained that writing complex and coherent sentences and finding appropriate English expressions were what they wanted to improve most.

Their expectations for writing instruction correspond to the skills they desire to improve. "Instruction of how to find appropriate words", "instruction of how to organize ideas" and "instruction of how to appreciate good readings and how to learn from these readings" are the top three foci they expect in writing instruction. The survey shows that the students clearly knew their problems and wanted the instructors to really focus on

these in class. It is also shown that grammar instruction was not favored. The interviews with the students show that they were already adequate in using English expressions; they wanted more instruction in developing ideas. They hoped the instructors could focus on sentence-level skills such as writing complex sentences and suggested the instructors integrate reading and writing in class.

The students' expectations for feedback are consistent with the skills they want to improve. "Feedback on content and organization" and "feedback on coherence and logic" are the top two aspects of feedback the students want. "Marginal comments" is the top form of feedback they want to receive. This indicates that the students needed higher-level comments more than just grammar corrections. Moreover, the students thought that there should be a hierarchy of the problems addressed.

When it comes to the form of evaluation the students like, timed essay exams are their favorite. The next favored form is portfolios. The interviews reveal that some students had never experienced portfolios; timed essay exams were the only way they had been assessed in and the way they had been used to.

**The problems in English writing and the skills the students want to improve**

Question five and six ask about what the students believed to be their writing problems and what kind of writing skills they wanted to improve. I limited the number of answers to three. For question five, I intended to have the students rank the problems they had, but it seemed few of them had done as required, so I could only count the problems they have but not rank their seriousness. For question six, I expected the students to list three major problems they had, but some of them did not follow the

instructions and only chose one or two, so I could only calculate the major problems they have.
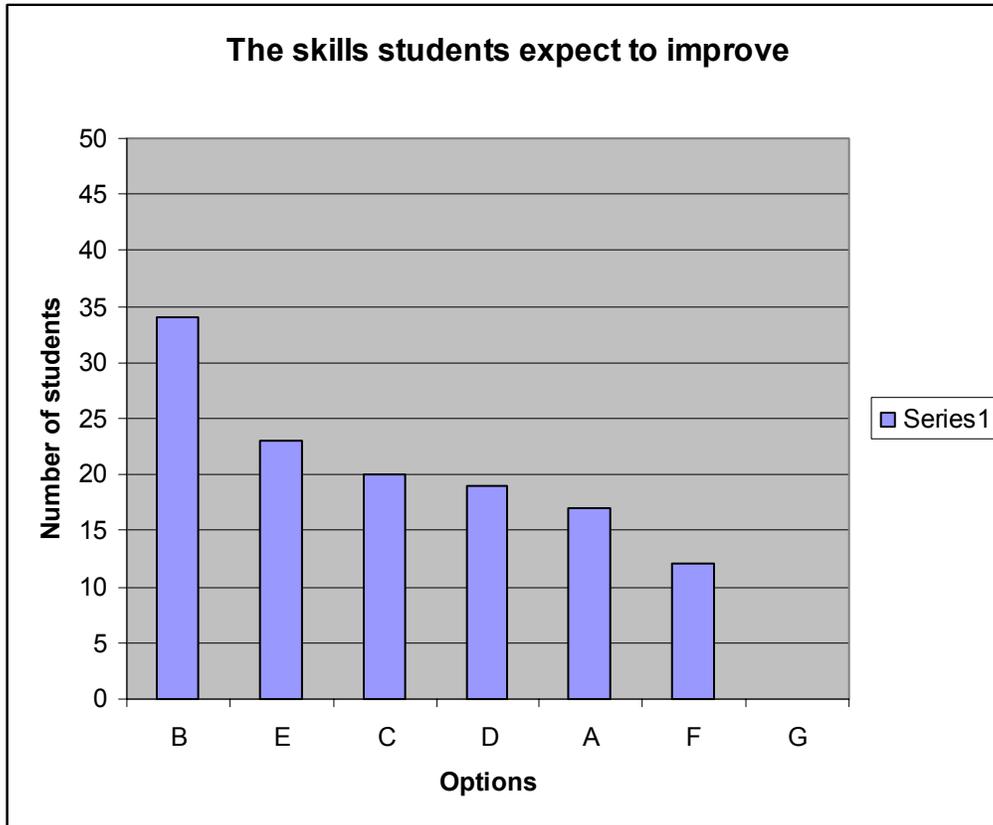
Reflecting on their problems, 41/50 students chose "lack of vocabulary", 29/50 chose "lack of sentence complexity", 26/50 students chose "grammar errors", and 23/50 chose "unfamiliarity with English academic rhetoric. Only one student indicated s/he had problems organizing ideas in the open-ended choice.
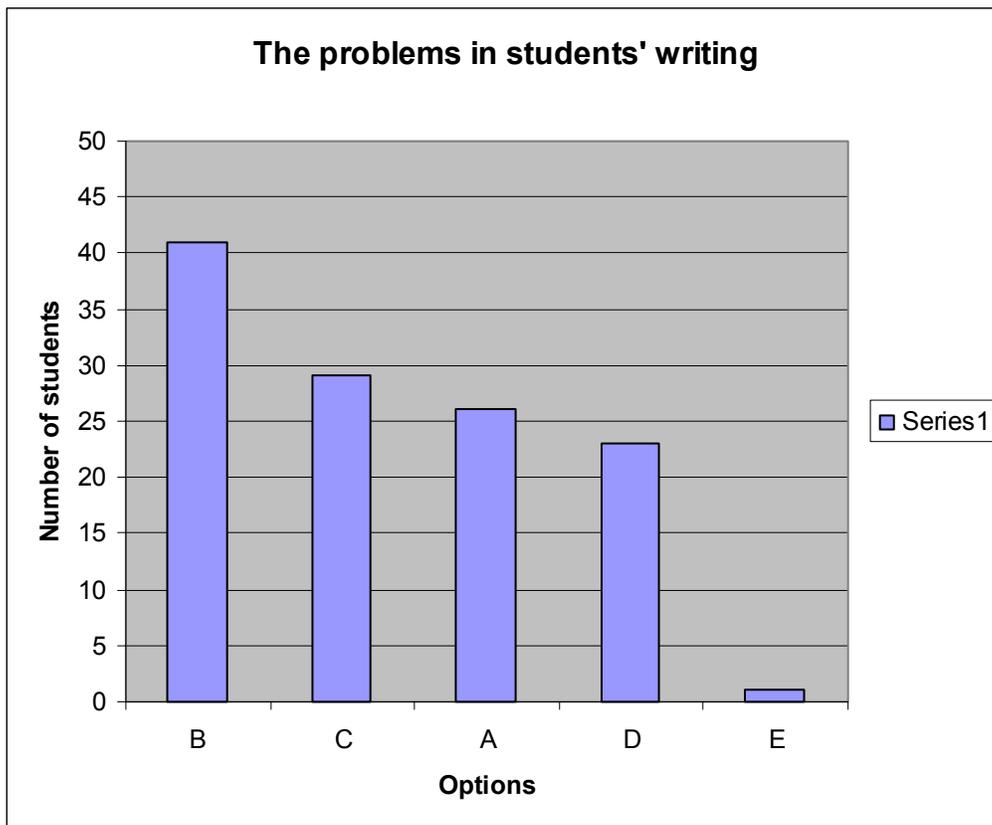
**The problems in students' writing**

A. grammar errors
B. lack of vocabulary
C. lack of sentence complexity
D. unfamiliarity with English academic rhetoric
E. other

For the skills they expect to improve, 34/50 chose "fluency of sentences", 23/50 chose " choice of vocabulary" , 20/50 chose "organization of ideas", 19/50 chose

"development of ideas", 17/50 chose "grammar accuracy", 12/50 chose "rhetoric" and

none of the students chose the open-ended answer.

**The skills students expect to improve**

Number of students (vertical axis, 0 to 50)

Options (horizontal axis): B, E, C, D, A, F, G

Series 1

A. grammar accuracy
B. fluency of sentences
C. origination of ideas
D. development of ideas
E. choice of vocabulary
F. rhetoric
G. other

In the interviews with the students, it is shown that the common problems are

lack of supportive ideas, lack of appropriate English expressions and sentence

complexity. One student said she almost had all the problems I listed, but she thought

her major problem was lack of ideas. She said she undertook very little English reading,

so she did not have a clear idea of how to develop and organize ideas. She knew the

five-paragraph structure, but, she found it very difficult to develop the supportive ideas them. At the same time, for some writing prompts, when guideline of ideas were given, she tended to translate these guidelines into English and repeated these sentences without being able to offer supporting details. Another student said she had many ideas when writing, but she could not find appropriate English expressions and also she could not use varied sentences and words. She found herself repeating some words and sentences very often. One interviewee told me she did not know how to organize ideas coherently. The sentences she wrote just jumped from one point to another, and she could not focus on the topic very well. She also said she had such problems when writing in Chinese.

In the interviews with the instructors, the first interviewee thought the main problem in the students' writing was lack of corresponding English expressions. "Grammar problems are not the most serious problem since they have had intensive grammar training before entering university. English rhetoric is not a problem either, for common rhetoric was taught the day the students learnt English writing. Lack of English expressions and complexity of sentences are major problems."
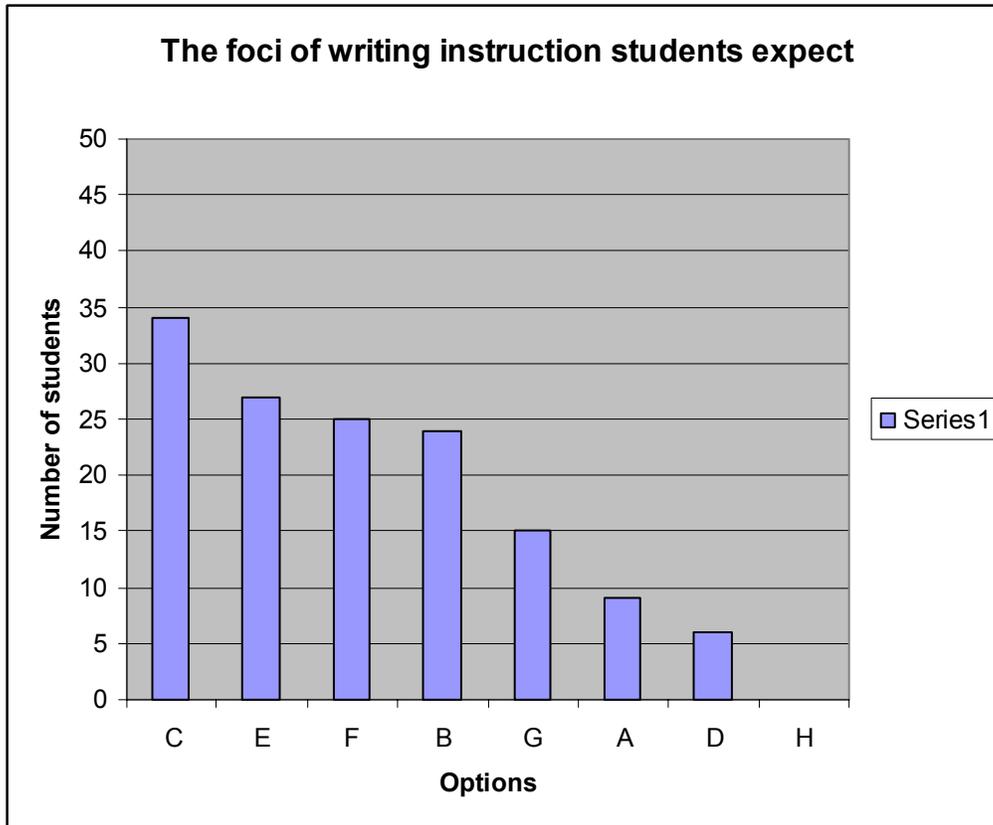
The second instructor interviewee thought grammar accuracy and word choice were very common, but coherence and logic were more serious problems. "In their writing, the sentences in body paragraphs do not support the thesis. It is like filling in translated Chinese sentences into English organization. The sentences are correct, and Chinese teachers can understand, but a native speaker of English may feel confused," she said.

Moreover, the third instructor interviewee mentioned that the students were very familiar with the standard English writing organization for they had had such training for many years before entering university. The major problem was they did not know how to use relevant ideas to support their thesis. They might include examples in their writing, but the examples were not relevant to the topic. Besides, the supportive ideas overlapped very often. "I can not comment each student's writing on these aspects, but I do discuss these problems in class sometimes," he said.

From the summary of the interviews with both teachers and students, it is clear they had similar perception on writing problems. Not being able to find appropriate English expressions was their top concern.

**The foci of the writing instruction the students want to receive**

When asked the foci of the writing instruction they needed, 34/50 chose "instruction of how to find appropriate words", 27/50 chose "instruction of how to organize ideas", 25/50 chose "instruction of how to appreciate good readings and how to learn from these readings", 24/50 chose " instruction of how to develop ideas", 15/50 chose "instruction of how to use templates and sentence patterns to prepare for various essay tests", 9/50 students chose "explanation of grammar rules and translation of sentences" and 6/50 chose "instruction of how to write more complex sentences".

## The foci of writing instruction students expect

A bar chart titled "The foci of writing instruction students expect" with the y-axis labeled "Number of students" (0 to 50) and the x-axis labeled "Options". The bars (Series1) are: C = 34, E = 27, F = 25, B = 24, G = 15, A = 9, D = 6, H = 0.

A. explanation of grammar rules translation of sentences
B. instruction of how to develop ideas
C. instruction of how to organize ideas
D. instruction of how to write more complex sentences
E. instruction of how to find appropriate words
F. instruction of how to appreciate good readings and how to learn from these readings
G. instruction of how to use templates and sentence patterns to prepare for various essay tests
H. other

In the interviews with the students, they talked about their expectations for the writing instruction. Their writing problems and what they wanted to improve correspond to what they wanted their instructors focus on in class. One interviewee told me she would like the teacher to teach her how to develop and organize ideas instead of focusing on sentence-level skills. The rest of the interviewees all wanted to improve sentence-level skills. One student said she hoped the teacher could teach her more sentence patterns. She

further explained that she wanted the teacher to show good English sentences and explain how they could use similar sentences in their writing. Another student said it was better if the teacher could suggest some good readings, teach them how to appreciate good reading and learn from them, in other words, combine reading and writing. One student thought writing varied complex sentences should be a focus so that they could avoid repetition. Moreover, how to find appropriate words was also her concern. When asked about templates, none of the interviewees said they needed them. They thought templates were too formulaic and would make their writing look similar to each other, but they did think transitional words needed to be taught.

The interviews with the instructors reveal that the foci of English writing instruction were determined by the instructors who designed their classes based on the students' levels of proficiency. In general, the writing instruction focused on sentence-level instruction such as grammar explanation or expansion of vocabulary.

The first instructor interviewee said he focused more on grammar explanation in class. He thought his students were inadequate in writing grammatically correct sentences, so it was no use teaching them higher-level skills. However, he said the instruction progressed from grammar explanation to development of ideas. At the initial stage, the students needed grammatical knowledge to write correct sentences. Then he also taught the student vocabulary by first showing the translation and then explaining how the words could be used in a sentence. He summarized that he focused on sentence-level skills such as writing complex sentences. Besides, he also taught the students how to develop and organize ideas, but this was not the main focus of his class. What the teacher should focus on in class depended on teachers instead of the university. He told

me he would communicate with students and would adjust teaching plans based on their feedback. The second instructor interviewee's teaching plan was flexible and was subject to changes depending on students' major or level of English proficiency. Grammar and development of ideas were the foci of her class. The third instructor interviewee told me, when teaching writing, he focused on the explanation of grammar and vocabulary usage more. Sometimes, he also taught them how to develop ideas and organize ideas, but not very often.

These foci of English writing instruction determined by the instructors partly correspond to the students' needs, but as the students' indicated they did not need too much instruction on grammar issues as the instructors believed.

**The forms of feedback the students need**

Questions eight, nine and ten reflect the students' needs for feedback. In question eight which asks about the forms of feedback the students need, 32/50 chose "feedback on content and organization", 29/50 chose "feedback on coherence and logic", 19/50 chose "feedback on word choice", 12/50 students chose "grammar correction", and no one chose the open-ended answer.
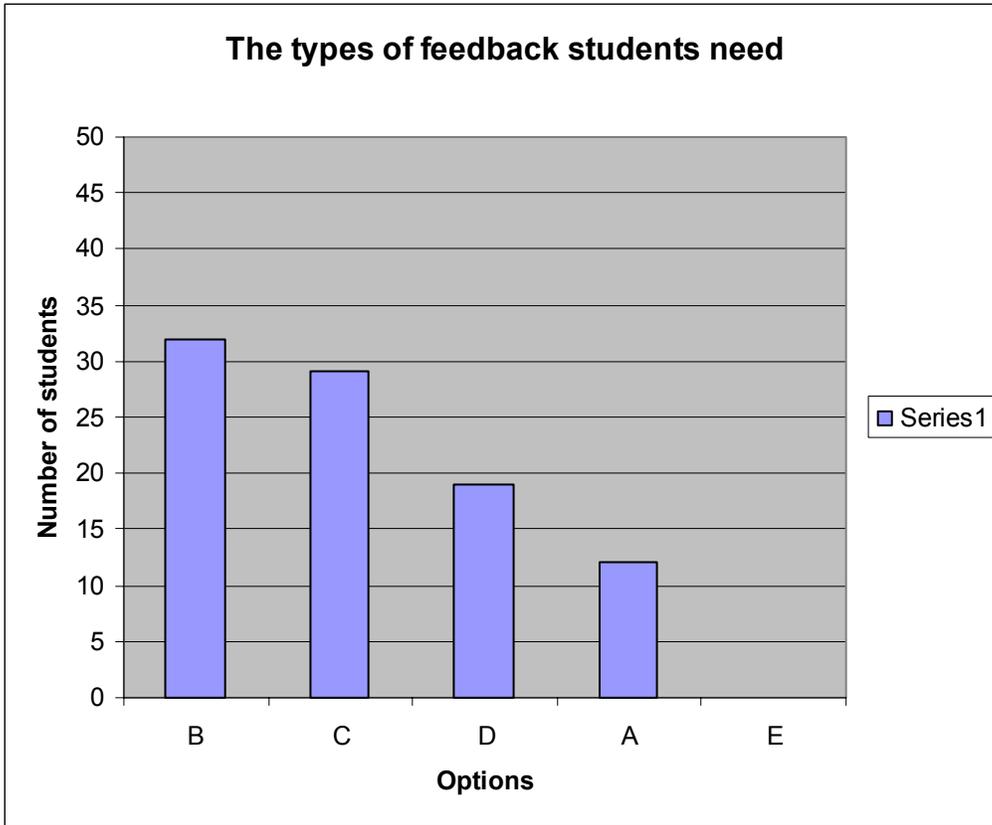
**The types of feedback students need**



A. grammar correction
B. feedback on content and organization
C. feedback on coherence and logic
D. feedback on word choice
G. other

In question nine, the students were asked about the ways of feedback they prefer. 36/50 students chose "marginal comments", 10/50 chose "conference", 9/50 chose "a letter explaining your problem", and no one chose the open-ended answer.

## The forms of feedback students need
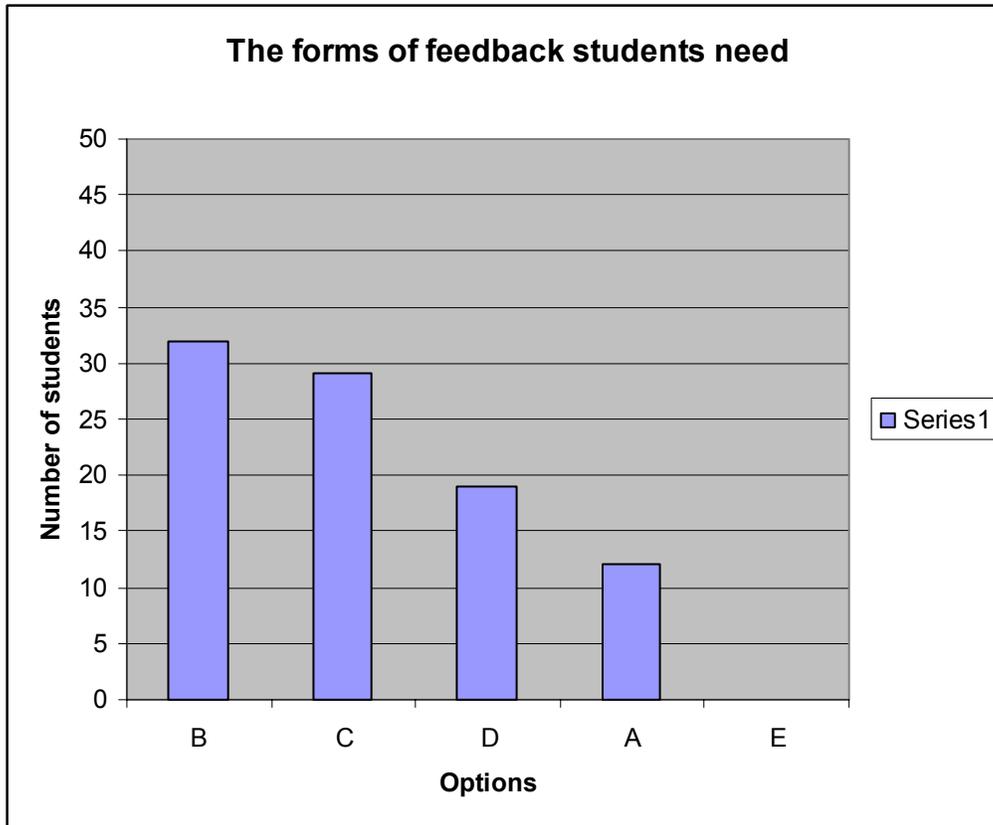


A. marginal comments
B. letter
C. conference
D. other

In question ten, 27/50 students said "no" to multi-drafts and 23/50 said "yes". Most of those who said "no" thought multi-drafts were time-consuming and demanded more effort. One student wrote "you can not write multi-drafts in exams, so it is useless to practice it". For those who supported multi-drafts, most thought it could help them see their inadequacy and gave them chances to correct, thus to improve in future writing tasks. Some also indicated this was a good way to promote communication between teachers and students.

In the interviews with the students, the first interviewee said she needed feedback on content, organization and coherence instead of on grammar errors. She thought it was a good way for them to learn from each other's problems or advantages if the teacher could comment on some student writing in class. The second interviewee preferred face-to-face conference with the teacher and wanted feedback on organization and coherence. She also said, "Sometimes the teacher may not understand what I wrote. During conferences, I can explain it to the teacher and s/he can help me find appropriate expressions."

She told me she could fix grammar errors on her own, but it was hard for her to find logic problems. Moreover, she hoped the teacher could summarize her strong points and weaknesses in written or oral form. The third student said she hoped the teacher could focus on sentence structure and grammar, as well as "underlining wrong places and correct them in the margin". She also said at present she needed more feedback on sentences and word choice, but when she improved, she needed more feedback on organization and coherence. The last student wanted the teacher to comment on the coherence of sentences and grammar errors and preferred a written summary of her problems and strengths.

In the interviews with the instructors, the first interviewee said when he gave feedback, he would underline errors, sometimes correct word choice or grammar errors on the paper, but he gave few comments on content or organization. He said, "If they have the sense of logic in Chinese, they do not have problems on content and organization." Moreover, he found feedback on word choice most helpful. He would cross out inappropriate words and write new ones underneath.

The second instructor interviewee told me, when she gave comments, she often wrote comments in the margin or between lines as well as a summary of the students' strengths and weaknesses as endnotes. She had twenty to thirty students in each class, but they only submitted writing once a month, so it was not too overwhelming. "The feedback on words choice and grammar can benefit the students immediately, but they still can not avoid these errors in future writing. In the long-term, the comments on development of ideas, coherence and logic help them improve a great deal which can be seen in there successive writing tasks," she told me.

The third instructor interviewee said he wrote comments on students' paper and commented more on grammar, sentence clarity but seldom on coherence or logic only when they interfered understanding. He never wrote a summary of their strengths and weaknesses, because time constraints and large student number did not allow him to do so.

To sum up, constrained by heavy workload and big class size, and holding the belief that the students need more feedback on word choice, the instructors commonly left feedback on vocabulary and grammar ignoring content and organization to some extent. However, the students did indicate they needed this aspect of feedback, which shows the gap between the students' need and the current practice

**The way of assessment the students prefer**

In question eleven, the students are asked about their preferred ways of assessment. 27/50 students chose "timed essay exams", 20/50 chose "portfolios", 2/50 chose "term papers" and 1/50 chose "other" saying s/he preferred "writing an essay and the teacher analyzing the essay in class".

## The way of assessment students need
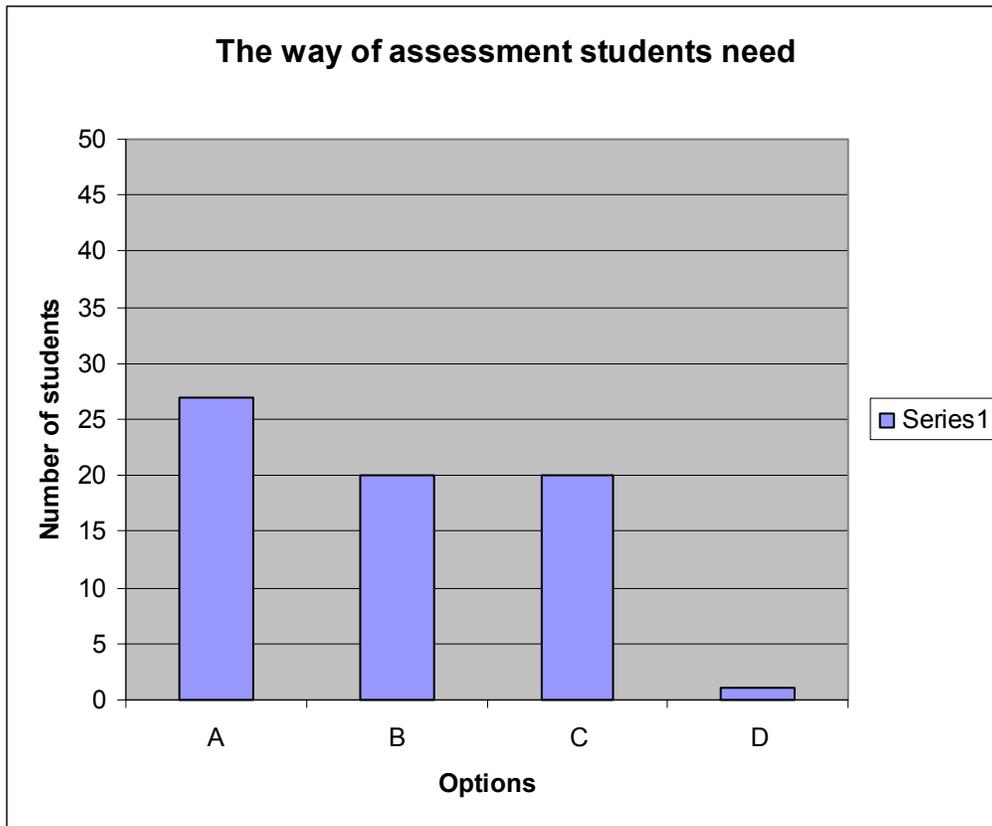


A. timed essay-exams
B. portfolios
C. term papers
D. other

In the interviews with the students, concerning the form of evaluation they preferred, none of these interviewees had ever been in a portfolio class, so I first explained what portfolios were to them. Only one interviewee said she liked timed- essay exams because she was used to this kind of evaluation and all major English tests adopted this form. She thought it was good to practice it for major English tests. She thought portfolio was good, but still insisted on taking essay-writing exams. Other interviews indicated they would prefer portfolios if they were given that option. One said that the portfolio could cover all forms of writing and topics they practiced, which was fair to

students because it could evaluate their average writing performance. The same student said she did not like timed-essay writing, because the topic of essay-test might be unfamiliar to some students, which might result in poor performance. Another interviewee said portfolios would enable her to see her improvement throughout the semester. The other interviewees expressed similar opinions toward this form of evaluation.

In the interview with the instructors, the first interviewee said he preferred timed essays examination as assessment method because he thinks "it can truly test students' real writing proficiency". He thinks the idea of portfolios is good, but not practical.

The second instructor interviewee thought essay tests would still be the major way of testing under current circumstances, but she also included portfolio in her grading system which accounted for 20 percent of the total grade. She thought it would be fair to evaluate students on their overall performance.

The third instructor interviewee also preferred timed-essay. "I do not use portfolio in my class. Since writing instruction is still test-oriented, it is better to test students in the form that they will be tested later in major examinations," he said.

To summarize, given the fact that all major English tests adopt timed essay exams, both teachers and students preferred this way of evaluation. But both the interviews with the students and instructors reveal that portfolios would be a fair and favorable way to evaluate students' writing.

**Discussion**

Through the survey and interviews, some significant findings deserve writing instructors' attention. I will discuss the findings from the aspects of the students' needs

for English writing, the students' problems in writing and expectations for writing instruction as well as the real situations in the current writing instruction at Beijing Jiaotong University.

First, from the students' perspective, it is clear that, at school, the students do not have a strong demand for English writing except for finishing assignments given by English teachers or passing various tests, thus commonly lacking the motivations to learn English writing. Only when they have the plan to continue further study in an English-speaking country or work in a multinational corporation where English is the major language may they feel the strong need to learn English writing. The possible audience of their writing is their English teachers. The purposes are to pass tests or simply to finish assignments. Argumentative and descriptive writing are what they usually practice. For a majority of the students, practical writing is preferred than argumentative writing or descriptive writing, for emails, CVs, or business letters are the types or writing they most probably need no matter what they do when they graduate.

Secondly, the writing problems in Chinese students' writing shown in the survey and interviews are not organizational or rhetorical as Kaplan (1966) argued, but syntactical. As the survey and interviews reveal the students have been learning English writing for many years and have been very familiar with English academic writing rhetoric. The five-paragraph organization has been practiced intensively when they prepare for the entrance examination to college or various exams in college. Their major problems are lack of English expressions and lack or ideas. The reasons for these problems can be detected from the interviews. Although they have two English classes each week, but as some interviewees indicate their major-related courses are already

too tight, so they can not devote more time to English writing, which means they will not spend time finding appropriate words or related sources for their writing. In the syllabus for college English, the relatively higher requirement is to be able to write a 150-180 word essay in English based on certain topics, outlines, tables or pictures in thirty minutes (College English Syllabus Revision team, 1999). The low requirement for English writing does not encourage the students to incorporate external sources in their writing. Their ideas may simply come from their life or the Chinese and English writing they have done. If they haven't read much, lack of ideas is not strange. Also, the informal talks with the instructors suggest that the students read very little English writings, so they do not have the chance to increase their vocabulary. Some students recite the bilingual English word lists and use them in their writing without really knowing how these words should be used. These might be the reasons for their writing problems.

Last but not least, after analyzing the students' need for writing and their writing problems, it is obvious that the students' expectation for writing instruction correspond to their needs. They need more instruction in practical writing besides academic writing. They have problems in finding appropriate words and developing ideas, so they hope the teachers can focus more on these aspects. Naturally, they hope the instructors can give more feedback on these aspects instead of simply doing grammar correction. All the needs for writing instruction arise from their writing problems and their needs for English writing.

In the end, when we view the current situations in English writing instruction, the gap between the students' expectation and the instructors' practice is not very wide.

The interviews with the instructors suggest that the teachers are aware of the students'

need for English writing and their writing problems so as to adjust their teaching to

satisfy these demands. They understand that when the students are on campus, they do

not have strong need for English writing except for preparing for various tests, such as

CET, TEOFL, GRE, so their teaching mainly focus on the form of writing that are often

tested, in other words, argumentative and descriptive writing. They also realize that the

students may also have different needs for English writing after they graduate, so it is

important not simply teach them the format of certain genres, but to teach them more

sentence-level writing skills such as writing grammatically correct sentences, finding

appropriate English words, developing ideas logically.

Moreover, the interviews also reveal that the instructors do not simply make a

lesson plan out of nowhere and stick to it for the whole term. They investigate what the

students need through informal talks, the writing collected and evaluation forms,

adjusting their teaching plan to different class and to students of different proficiency-

levels. The interviewees all agree that lack of appropriate English expressions is the key

problem of their students' writing and lack of ideas is the second one, which correspond

to the students' own acknowledgement. Grammar problem is not the top concern, but

some teachers do cover this intensively in class. They do not use the process approaches

which are very popular in North America, and classify their approaches either product-

based even if they do cover a few different genres in class, both because their teaching is

evaluated based on the students' products, and because the students can not put too much

effort on English writing thus only willing to submit one draft. These findings prove that

importing approaches to teaching English writing might not be appropriate to non-

English majors given the significant contextual difference between the South America and China.

As for feedback for writing, the instructors interviewed give sentence-level feedback more often. Though content and organization are covered, they are not the focus. Written feedback on students' assignment is the common type of feedback. Teachers can not choose the evaluation form, since the university administer timed essay tests at the end of each semester. Some teachers do favor portfolio, but they also think it is not practical given the test policy of the university and the time and effort students can expend on English writing.

In conclusion, as the survey and interviews reveal that the gap between the students' need for writing and the current writing instruction is not very serious. The students wish to improve two aspects most, sentence-level skills and development of ideas. As for the most commonly used genre they need at school, argumentative writing, both instructors and students think rhetoric is not a major problem. Moreover, both students and instructors think that lack of vocabulary is a major issue and it is extensively covered in class.

However, the students understand they may need more practical writing when they start to work, but few teachers include this element in their teaching. In addition, a more obvious gap is that the students want more help with developing ideas besides expansion of vocabulary and grammar instruction, but the teachers cover very little in this aspect. As for feedback, most students hope the teacher could give a summary of their weaknesses and strengths besides doing error correction on their writing. The interview

shows that the teacher can not always satisfy this need, because of time constraints and workload of big classes.

## Implications for teaching

Given the number of participants in this research, the following implications more appropriately apply to Beijing Jiaotong University.

As the survey and interviews suggest, the students do not have strong desire to learn English writing except for passing various tests, but they do realize they may need English writing in their future life either for further study or in their job. Therefore, English writing instruction should not be confined to certain genres. It is wise to teach students sentence-level writing skills such as finding appropriate words, writing grammatically correct and coherent sentences. In addition, considering the students immediate need for English writing when they hunt for a job or apply for a university in an English speaking country, practical writing should be included in the teaching of test-oriented argumentative and descriptive writing. To better understand what the students need, it is appropriate to conduct a need analysis at the beginning of each semester or simply communicating with the students about their need for writing instruction, which has been proved very effective in the interviews with the instructors. The writing instruction should focus more on developing ideas and coherence instead of stressing too much on grammar instruction and vocabulary expansion.

When giving feedback, it is very helpful for the students if they can include more information about the organization of ideas and coherence of sentences besides doing error correction. Though it demands more time and effort, it will benefit students' writing in the long run. As for the evaluation of writing, the university should take into

account the fairness of portfolio and try to include it in the final grade even if it only

constitutes a small proportion.

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**Appendix 1**

**Questionnaire for Students**

**Background**

1. Have you had independent English writing instructions? 你接受过单独的英语写作训练吗?

2. Yes/ No

If you have ever had any form of writing instructions, what was the focus/were the foci?

如果接受过英语写作训练，这种训练的重心是什么?(最多选择3个) 例如

A. explanation of grammar rules translation of sentences 解释语法翻译句子

B. instruction of how to develop ideas 拓展思路

C. instruction of how to organize ideas 组织思路

D. instruction of how to write more complex sentences 如何写复杂句

E. instruction of how to find appropriate words 如何用合适的词汇

F. instruction of how to appreciate good readings and how to learn from these readings 欣赏好的文章并从中学习

G. instruction of how to use templates and sentence patterns to prepare for various essay tests 使用模板以及句型以便应付各种考试

E. other_____

3. What kind of feedback do your teachers give? Check all that apply. 你的老师用什么方式批改你的写作?

A. Grammar correction 修改语法 B. feedback on content and organization 在内容和结构上给反馈 C. feedback on coherence and logic 连贯和逻辑性给反馈 D. feedback

on word choice 词汇 E. other_____

4．How many drafts do your teachers require? 你的老师要求你的写作写几稿？

5．If multi drafts are required, do your teachers give feedback on revisions? 如果要求多稿，你的老师会在修改稿上给出反馈吗？

**Need**

1．Who is the audience of your English writing? 你的英语写作的读者是什么人？

A. raters of English tests such as CET, TOEFL or other B. professors in China C. Professors in an English speaking country D. Other_____

2．Do you need academic writing outside the academic context? 你在学校外还需要学术类如议论文，说明文，学术论文方面的写作吗？

Yes  No. If yes, in what context？如果是，在什么情况下？

3．What is your purpose of learning English? 你学习英语的目的是什么？

A. to pass tests 通过各种考试如四级，六级，雅思，托福 B. look for a job 找工作

C. study or live in an English-speaking country 在英语国家读书，生活 D. other 其他

_____

4．What kind of writing do you need to learn? 你需要学习哪方面的写作？

A. poems, novels 诗歌，小说 B. persuasive writing 辩论性写作 C. practical writings such as letters, CVs, 应用文写作如信件, 简历D. descriptive writing 描述性文章 E. other 其他_____

5．What do you think your major problems are? 你认为你写作的主要的问题是什么？

(Choose three at most and rank them 最多选三个，并且进行排序)

A. grammar errors 语法错误 B. lack of vocabulary 缺乏词汇 C. lack of sentence complexity 缺乏句子复杂性 D. unfamiliarity with English academic rhetoric不熟悉英语的学术文体 D. other 其他_____

6．What are the three major aspects that you want to improve most? 请列出三个你最想提高的写作技能

A. grammar accuracy 语法的准确运用, B. fluency of sentences 句子的流畅, C. origination of ideas 思路的组织, D. development of ideas 思路的拓展, E. choice of vocabulary词汇的选择, F. rhetoric文体（例如美式学术文章的文体和中式的不同) G. other 其他_____

7． What do you expect to be the focus of writing instruction? 你希望写作教学的重点是什么? (check three at most 最多选择三个)

A. explanation of grammar rules translation of sentences 解释语法翻译句子

B. instruction of how to develop ideas 拓展思路

C. instruction of how to organization ideas 组织思路

D. instruction of how to write more complex sentences 如何写复杂句

E. instruction of how to find appropriate words 如何用合适的词汇

F. instruction of how to appreciate good readings and how to learn from these readings 欣赏好的文章并从中学习

G. instruction of how to use templates and sentence patterns to prepare for various essay tests 使用模板以及句型以便应付各种考试

H. other其他_____

8．What kind of feedback do you expect your teachers to give on your writing? 你希望老师给你的写作什么样的反馈？

A. grammar correction 语法改错 B. feedback on content and organization 内容结构方面的意见C. feedback on coherence and logic 逻辑性和连贯性方面的意见D. feedback on word choice 词汇选择方面的意见 G. other 其他_____

9. How do you want your teachers to give you feedback? 你希望老师给你什么样的反馈？

A. marginal comments 文章空白处写意见, B. letter 写一封单独的信来告诉你文章的问题, C. conference 和你单独会谈, D. other 其他_____

10. Do you expect your teachers to require multi-drafts? Why? 你希望老师要求写多稿吗？为什么？

11. What is your favorite way of assessment? （你喜欢什么样的评估方式？）

A. timed essay-exams 限时的短文写作, B. portfolios把一个学期所有写过的文章放在一起综合评价, C. term papers 写一篇研究论文, D. other其他_____)

## Appendix 2

### Interview Questions for Writing Instructors

1. Is English writing an independent course offered at your university?

Yes/ No

2. What is the focus of writing instruction in your class? (three at most)

A. explanation of grammar rules and translation of sentences

B. instruction of how to develop ideas

C. instruction of how to organize ideas

D. instruction of how to write more complex sentences

E. instruction of how to find appropriate words

F. instruction of how to appreciate good readings and how to learn from these readings

G. instruction of how to use templates and sentence patterns to prepare for various essay tests

H. other_____

3. How do you classify your writing instruction?

   A. product-based, B. process-based, C. genre-based D. mixture of any of these, E. other_____

4. Who is the possible audience of your students' writing? (Three at most)

A. raters of English tests such as CET, TOEFL or other B. professors in China C. Professors in an English speaking country D. Other_____

5. Do you perceive your students need academic writing outside the academic context?

If yes, in what context?

6.　What do you think are the purposes of your students' writing? (for example, A. to pass tests, B. look for a job, C. study or live abroad, D. other_____)

7.　What kind of writing do you mainly teach in your class? (A. poems, novels, B. persuasive writing, C. practical writings such as letters, CVs, D. descriptive writing etc，E. other_____)

8.　What do you think are the three major problems in your students' writing are?

A. grammar errors B. lack of vocabulary C. lack of sentence complexity D. unfamiliarity with English academic rhetoric D. other_____

9.　Do you require students to do multiple drafts?

10. How do you give feedback? A. marginal comments B. letter C. conference, D. other _____

11. What kind of feedback do you give?

A. grammar correction B. feedback on content and organization C. feedback on coherence and logic D. feedback on word choice E. other_____

12. What kind of feedback do you think benefit the students most?

13. What is your preferred method of assessment?

A. timed essay exams, B. portfolios C. term papers D. other_____)